

MENTORING

There is an old joke about a mom and dad with a boatload of kids. The two parents are constantly busy doing all the household chores. They can barely keep up. When a concerned neighbor asks the frazzled parents why they don't have their many children do the chores, the frustrated parents say, "We're too busy to show them what to do!"

Although simply instructing children, does not always get them motivated. Nobody likes being told what to do. Think about our own lives. We've received tons of instruction; lots of advice on ways to do things and, sometimes, ways not to do things. Advice and instruction comes from everywhere: siblings, neighbors, friends, strangers, teachers, parents, and of course our spouses. People seem to know what's best for us, and are ready with unsolicited opinions to save us from our own ruin.

Here's an example: The other day, while entering the bank, an elderly woman, unknown to me, scolded me that I should not be outside without a winter coat. I held the door open for the lady and offered a weak smile. Her annoying instruction made me think about all the instructions I often give my children. I'm sure they get tired of dad when I am barking orders and giving directions. My kids respond best when I help them reach a conclusion on their own, preferably the right conclusion. This is known as mentoring

The world needs less instruction and more mentoring. There are some key differences between the two methods. Instructors give directions, but mentors truly teach. An instructor will tell his student what to do; but a mentor will help his pupil arrive at the desired conclusion himself. A mentor will ask questions until understanding seems self-taught for the pupil. An instructor hands over knowledge like a dog on a leash. Sometimes it gets away. But a good mentor will guide his pupil until understanding is owned by the pupil. A mentor will question until his charge discovers dominion and control of the subject being taught.

The problem is that mentoring takes time, sometimes it takes a lot of time. And like the joke about the frazzled parents with all the kids, people can feel like there is no time to mentor.

But when we take the time to mentor we invest in a relationship with another person. As a mentor we allow others to find their way while helping them with course corrections and insuring their safety. Nothing succeeds like one's own discovery of a skill, an idea, a philosophy, or a talent. Anything learned from the inside out is something that will long be remembered and incorporated into the learner's life. That's the process a mentor encourages.

My Dad is a good mentor. I remember being about twelve and helping dad remodel the back porch. We were removing furring strips from a brick wall. Each had a lag bolt on the top and a lag bolt on the bottom. Dad showed me what to do and then told me to get to work. While he removed some boards, I worked diligently on my first lag bolt. Unfortunately, I chose to remove the top bolt first. It came out pretty well, so I sat down on the floor to remove the lower bolt (with 8 feet of furring strip dangling above me, held to the wall by the one bolt I was removing).

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Dad calmly watching me. I freed the bottom lag bolt (holding the board to wall) and was just about to speak of my accomplishment, when the furring strip departed from the wall, bonked me on the head, rolled off my right shoulder and crashed to the linoleum floor.

“Ouch!”

“You okay son?” Dad was smiling. I didn’t see anything funny. “What do you think happened?”

“I don’t know!” I was rubbing my head.

“Did you remove the lag screws?” asked Dad.

“Yea.”

“Did you remove them in any particular order?”

“No,” I told him, “I just took them out!”

“Can you think for a minute which one you take out first?” Dad questioned.

“I don’t know. The top one first, I guess. Then I sat down and worked on the bottom...” The light bulb switched on in my brain. And I explained to Dad (not Dad instructing me) that I should have taken the bottom bolt out first and then stood up and worked on the top bolt.

“Why didn’t you stop me, Pop?”

“I wanted you to learn something.”

Dad was right. Many years later I still remember the lesson, and I remember for reasons that go beyond lag bolts. Dad mentored me through a simple teachable moment. He could have just chewed me out, but instead he provided a discovery that I thought was mine.

Six years ago, I mentored my eldest son when he had to build a full sized work bench for a merit badge. I think he was twelve. He got the plans. Together we got a load of lumber and he began to build. I showed him how to work the tools, and asked him questions about safety. We discussed the design and I watched his assembly. I asked questions to guide him through the weak parts of his design, and helped him arrive at his own solutions to strengthen the bench. He assembled the project as I continually asked him to choose his next step.

If I had attempted this project myself, it would have been completed in a Saturday afternoon. To build it while simply instructing my son and getting his help, would have taken a whole Saturday. But to build it while mentoring my boy, took an entire weekend, and an entire week of evenings.

Now the bench is in the corner of our basement loaded with computer parts. My son builds computers from scratch, soldering parts together that are a mystery to me, but the end products are working computers. I hope that my mentoring, on the construction of a simple work bench, helped him to learn something about putting things together and building what he builds today.

I know I am providing you unsolicited instructions about mentoring. Ironic, isn’t it? But mentoring is on my mind. I have three strapping sons and a beautiful, young daughter. When all is falling down around me, when schedules collide, when the wants of my children do not coincide with their parents’ wants, I revert to instruction. Like a platoon leader solving battlefield problems, orders issue and mentoring ceases. I struggle daily and swing back and forth between instructing and mentoring.

I suppose there are times to instruct and times to mentor, but as my children age right before my eyes, I ask myself, “Have I done my job? Have I simply provided instructions that will fade over time? Or I have mentored my children so that someday they will grasp dominion and control over their own lives?”

Peace,

John C. Lorenzen, Federation Chief Keokuk