



On Mentoring

by Peter D. Thornton

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We all place emphasis on the quality of education for environmental health students because they are the future of our profession. We need just as much emphasis, however, on the mentoring that occurs outside of education, in the real world. A mentor is a teacher or coach. It makes little difference whether you are a manager, a supervisor, a faculty member, or the one showing the newest employee the ropes - you are a mentor. Being a mentor is an opportunity that is open to nearly everyone, but being a high quality mentor is a much different matter. It seems there are some mentors that produce more than their share of professionals that move on to success. I was lucky to have as one of my mentors, Willard C. Galbreath, the recently retired (after 41 years) Environmental Administrator at the Broward County Health Department. Since so many successful people have come from his department, we are often asked why. The initial answer is, "I'm not sure," but, when considered in detail, the answer comes to light. He taught some things that were very basic, but the lessons he imparted were learned by example - as a daily way of life instead of by recommendation or by lecture, which brought sharp focus to his underlying principles. He taught patience. No matter the extent of the emergency at hand, his demeanor stayed the same. No decision was made - regardless of the pressure - before sufficient objective information was obtained. In this way, and in relation to patience, he taught objective thinking. If you don't know, don't guess. If the facts aren't there, get them. Getting help in making big decisions is preferred to making wrong decisions. He taught that, to be successful, you have to surround yourself with good people; obviously in environmental health, but also in peripheral and support positions. And when you can, hire people

that know more than you do. In keeping with the concept of good people, provide them with necessary training. If he hadn't provided me with ten months of educational leave with pay to get my MPH, you probably wouldn't be reading this column now. If employees make you look good, give them the deserved credit - or they may never do it again. Listening to employees is more important than dictating to employees, and it also takes more effort. He taught that family is more important than work, and that if you couldn't get the work done in eight hours a day, you weren't doing it right. If you can't keep up with your workload and you are an efficient time manager, your time is better spent justifying and lobbying for more positions. He taught that before you can run, you have to crawl. Creating and following policy and procedure manuals, training staff in the practice of documentation, and setting up accountability systems are prerequisites to innovation. He taught respect for employees. Work would be checked, but not to celebrate the finding of a trivial mistake. Mistakes were found to ensure that they wouldn't happen twice, to learn from them, and to adjust the system when necessary. He gave us our work ethic. While none of us were making high salaries, we did sign up to do a good day's Work for an agreed upon rate. He gave a good day's work every day. Though his department's quality was high, he wasn't into accolades and awards. High quality was a simple expectation, just as he expected his employees to become credentialled and to join professional associations. In other words, quality never seemed to be something unusual. When reminiscing with other "graduates" of his program, even after a dozen years, we often remark that when we get into tough situations, we always think to ourselves, "How would Willard do it?" The answer to that question is the best answer. There are many innovators out there who are moving environmental health into the next era, but the glue holding this profession together is the existence of a few very good mentors. I was lucky. Periodically I have to ask myself, "Are my employees just as lucky?" It helps me get back on track.