



Moving from Telling to Empowering

Letting your protégé struggle can be the best lesson of all
By Jim Perrone

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As a healthcare leader, you have probably achieved success based on your accomplishments as an individual. For instance, your ability to solve problems and make decisions may have helped you to earn a promotion. However, those same competencies can work against you in your mentoring relationship. As a mentor, your role is not to solve your protege's problems-it is to facilitate that individual's problem-solving efforts. This requires that you resist the temptation to tell your protege what to do and instead allow the individual to think through problems and come up with solutions independently. Following is an approach you can use to develop your protege's problem-solving skills that will foster independence and provide greater growth opportunities.

Focus on the person, not the problem.

Like most mentors, you probably feel protective of your protege. Consequently, when your protege approaches you with a problem, your first instinct is to come to the rescue with a solution. However, by focusing on solving your protege's problems, you deny the individual a valuable learning opportunity. Concentrate instead on your protege's development. By really listening to your protege explain a problem, you'll begin to understand the individual's strengths, weaknesses, and fears about the situation. From this, you'll gain insight into which areas your protege needs to develop to effectively deal with similar issues in the future.

Offer guidance, not solutions.

Encouraging your protege to think independently doesn't mean you can't offer any direction. But before you do, let your protege think through the problem and share the thought processes and problem-solving techniques. This method lets you know that your protege has made an effort to solve the problem independently. When you do make a suggestion, instead of using the words "you

should," share a similar experience you may have had and relay to your protege your approach to solving the problem. Then ask your protege how that approach might work in his or her situation. Another way to offer guidance without providing answers is to play the role of devil's advocate. This approach helps your protege see the consequence of his or her decisions. The point is, the more you encourage the protege to develop solutions, the greater the growth and empowerment that will occur.

Know when to give advice.

While it's best to have your protege come up with solutions, there will be times when that individual requires your advice on how to handle an issue. How you choose to deal with your protege in such situations will affect the pace of the individual's development. The more you play the role of teller, the more dependent your protege will be on you for answers. At the same time, offering too little information can make your protege feel abandoned or anxious. There is no right way to behave in every situation, but what is appropriate in each mentor/protege interaction is that you make a conscious choice regarding what will be best for your protege's development. For example, if your protege is new and has limited experience and knowledge, that individual is likely to benefit more from your recommendations. But as your protege begins to grow and develop more confidence, you'll want to provide a range of options on how to handle a specific situation and let the individual decide the best course of action to take.

Provide follow-up.

Following up with your protege to discuss the outcome of the situation is key to helping the individual derive learning from the experience. The follow-up should go beyond whether your protege solved the problem. It's important to find out what the individual has learned from the situation and the process. When discussing the outcome, ask your protege: What about your approach worked and what would you do differently in the same situation? What did you learn from this experience that would be useful in other situations? What did you learn about yourself in the process? Your protege's answers will give you an opportunity to evaluate his or her progress by revealing areas in which the individual demonstrated learning.

Throughout your mentoring relationship, your protege will look to you for direction. As a mentor, your role is



to offer that guidance; however, your protege shouldn't become so dependent on you that he or she cannot function alone. By allowing your protege to make decisions-and mistakes-you create an opportunity for lifelong learning.