



## HIGHLIGHT

# Learning from Each Other: Successful Mentoring/ Protege Relationships Explore the mentor/mentee relationship and what YALSA is doing to make mentoring more effective

Linda W. Braun

**L**ater this year YALSA will unveil a new virtual mentoring program. This revised opportunity will be for library professionals who have been in the field for many years, and for those who are newer to the work. The new program will focus on short-term pairings that give YALSA members the chance to learn from each other at a particular time of need. As we continue to design and develop this program, I've been thinking about the qualities of a good mentor and the qualities of a good protege. Read on to find out what I've come up with.

## What Qualities Does a Good Mentor Have?

### Able to Listen

The first thing that comes to mind when I think of mentor qualities is the ability to listen. As I think of the people who have mentored me over the years (and, by the way, I still have people who I consider mentors even though I've been in this work for thirty-plus years), they have all focused on listening to what I asked, what I needed, and what I was interested in. They didn't simply tell me what to do or how to do it. They asked questions that led me to articulate what I was looking for and then were able to help me find what I needed.

### Can Facilitate Thinking

All of the mentors I've worked with have been able to facilitate dialogue, thinking, and next steps. Mentors who are successful ask questions that spark insight or an idea for a direction to take or a project to take on.

## Knows the Field Today

Being in the field for thirty-plus years, as I have, doesn't do anyone any good unless the experience gained during those years can be placed in the context of the current world of libraries. A good mentor isn't just focused on how things have always been done; they are focused on how to take that experience and translate it to the needs of teens and libraries today.

## Aware of Own Expertise

No one is good at everything. When thinking about being a mentor, the professional needs to consider where their own expertise lies. A good mentor asks, what experience do I have that can help others succeed in the work? It's also important to be aware of knowledge gaps and to be open with potential proteges about those gaps.

## Is Self-Reflective

A mentor who is successful is one that continues to reflect on their own professional experiences and growth. They are able to articulate why something was or wasn't successful in their professional life and able to help the protege reflect on their own work and how to make changes in order to be successful in that work.

## Is a Cheerleader

A successful mentor will cheer on the protege and sincerely want the protege to succeed. This can mean sending emails or texts or tweets to find out how the protege is doing, particularly when the protege is testing out something new, and providing feedback that will honestly help the protege move forward in the work.

## HIGHLIGHT

### **Provides Feedback**

The mentor shouldn't just listen to ideas and speak about their own experience. The mentor needs to listen to what the protege has to say, hear about the protege's experiences, and provide feedback on how to improve or change an idea or revise an activity in order to improve experience.

### **Is Available**

A mentor who is too busy to listen or facilitate is not going to be really helpful. Anyone thinking of taking on a mentoring role with a colleague and make sure he has the time to listen, facilitate, and support the needs of the protege. A mentor might have all of the other qualities listed here, but if they aren't available to actually do the mentoring work that's required, then they aren't going to be a good match for any potential protege.

### **Is Open to Learning**

One of the greatest benefits of being a mentor, from the mentor side of things, is the opportunity to learn from those who have different experiences, may be new to a field, or have different points of view. A good mentor shouldn't only expect to share knowledge from their experience. The mentor should also be willing and able to improve their own skills and knowledge through the mentor/protege experience.

### **What Qualities Does a Good Protege Have?**

#### **Is a Good Listener**

A protege needs to be open to what the mentor has to say and open to the possibility that their own ideas about how to move forward aren't necessarily the best ideas.

#### **Is a Good Questioner**

When working with a mentor, the protege needs to articulate what they want

to learn and ask questions of the mentor. It shouldn't only be the mentor's job to prod the protege for information.

#### **Trusts the Mentor**

A protege has to believe that the mentor has the skills and experience required in order to support the protege's needs. Trust means a willingness to try out some of the ideas suggested by the mentor, even if they seem far-fetched, and providing feedback on what worked and didn't work.

#### **Is Self-Reflective**

It's not only mentors who need to reflect on their own experience and skills. Proteges have to realistically reflect on what they know and don't know, what they want to learn, and why past professional experiences have succeeded or not.

#### **Takes Responsibility**

There is only so much that a mentor can do for and with a protege. That's why the protege has to take responsibility for acting on the activities, advice, and support of the mentor. It's up to the protege to actually see what, from the mentor/protege relationship, works and doesn't work.

#### **Is Able to Determine Professional Needs**

A protege can't expect that a mentor will easily know what types of support are needed. A good protege will have put some thought into what their needs are and is able to articulate those needs, and why they think the needs exist, to the mentor.

#### **Is Flexible**

A protege may go into a mentoring relationship certain that the process is going to go a certain way, or expecting a certain set of outcomes will be achieved. However, a good protege is able to be flexible in the mentor/protege work and is willing to let go when a particular path is demonstrated

as not being the right one to take in order to succeed.

#### **Is Able to Take Risks**

When working with a mentor, the protege should be willing to try things out that might seem uncomfortable. It's through taking risks and trying new things that a protege will really learn about how to succeed in the profession.

#### **Is Willing to Admit Failure**

If a protege is going to try out some of the ideas developed with the mentor, then it's likely not everything will go as planned. That's not a bad thing. If the protege can then discuss with the mentor what worked and didn't work and analyze the why of the failure, then that will certainly help with future professional growth and development.

#### **Has Time for the Relationship**

It's imperative that a protege has the time required to work with a mentor. A protege needs to be able to answer emails or take part in various forms of live interaction. The protege needs time to try things out and report back. And, the protege needs time to ask questions, be self-reflective, and listen to what the mentor has to say.

#### **What if There Is No Chemistry**

When paired together, a mentor and protege need to work as a team with respect, trust, and honesty. While each member of the pair may have all of these qualities, a mentor/protege pairing might not be as successful as hoped. Sometimes personalities simply conflict. The pair should be ready and willing to acknowledge when something is not working and move on from the relationship. Each participant needs to be willing to analyze why the relationship didn't work, and before taking on another mentor/protege experience rethink what is hoped for as the outcome of the relationship.



A failed mentor/protege relationship does not mean giving up the possibility of being a mentor or a protege forever. It's a learning experience and an opportunity to try again with new knowledge and skills in place.

## It Never Stops

My career in the library world has spanned several types of positions and turned into something I never expected when I began working with youth. I have to say that without the support of mentors who demonstrated to me what was possible to accomplish I would not have had the opportunities in my career that got me to where I am today. Sometimes the mentorship was totally informal, and sometimes it was formal. I've worked with mentors who had experience in exactly the work I was doing at the moment (for example, a teen

library staff member who mentored me when I worked in teen services), and I've had successful experiences with mentors whose professional work was very different from my own (for example, an academic librarian mentored me while I worked as a library consultant). I still sometimes feel the need for a mentor and am fortunate that I am able to connect with people, primarily through the professional network that YALSA provides, who can mentor me through various professional experiences. I expect my days of being a protege are far from over.

## Next for YALSA

At the 2017 Midwinter Meeting, the YALSA Board approved reenvisioning the mentoring program ([www.ala.org/yalsa/sites/ala.org/yalsa/files/content/Mentoring\\_Reboot\\_MW17.pdf](http://www.ala.org/yalsa/sites/ala.org/yalsa/files/content/Mentoring_Reboot_MW17.pdf)), which lays

out a new plan to make YALSA's mentoring reach more members and better serve their needs. Stay tuned to YALSA's various communications outlets—including *YALS*—for updates on the association's new virtual mentoring opportunities. If you have thoughts about being a mentor, a protege, or about YALSA's virtual mentoring program as a whole, let me know by commenting on the YALSA blog post that complements this article. The post is available at: <http://yalsa.ala.org/blog/2017/07/01/yals-summer-2017-mentoring-thoughts>.

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## FROM THE PRESIDENT

(continued from page 3)

ballot for the YALSA board? If so, please contact Sarah Sogigian, the chair of the current Governance Nominating Committee, at [sarah@masslibsystem.org](mailto:sarah@masslibsystem.org).

YALSA leadership isn't for everyone, which is why one of the priorities of YALSA's strategic plan is to institute a three-track leadership development curriculum for frontline library staff, managers, and senior leadership for YALSA and the profession. Linda Braun, YALSA's Continuing Education Consultant, is using the Educopia Institute's Nexus Lab: Layers of Leadership Across Libraries, Archives, and Museums (<https://educopia.org/deliverables/nexus-lab-layers-leadership-across-libraries-archives-and-museums-september-2016-draft>) design frameworks to develop YALSA's "teens-first" leadership training. Take a look at the draft document—there are six stages: leading self, leading others, leading the

department, leading multiple departments, leading the organization, and leading the profession. Each category is then broken down into the following: my daily challenge, key leadership tasks, skills to perform tasks, changes I (and others) want to see, and greater outcomes. The training for the first cohort will occur by the end of 2017, and I think it's going to be amazing.

Thank you to all of the YALSA board members and YALSA staff for your hard work and for your help during my presidential year. I'm looking forward to serving on the board as past president and helping Sandra Hughes-Hassell during her presidential year. As past president, I will be serving on the first Board Development Committee, which, until the recent bylaws change, was called the Governance Nominating Committee (<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/sites/ala.org/yalsa/files/content/>

[BoardDevelopmentCmte\\_MW17.pdf](#)). Our committee will do much more than find qualified candidates for the YALSA ballot. We'll be helping YALSA members grow into leadership positions in the division, hosting board orientation training at conferences, and offering board assessments to help guide board training activities throughout the year. If you have governance experience (in YALSA or other organizations) and are interested in serving on the inaugural Development Committee, please contact Crystle Martin, since as president-elect this fall, she will be appointing members.

Read on to find out more ways that you can become a leader in your library, in your community, and in your profession. Thanks again for the opportunity to serve as leader of this amazing organization.

Bcst.

Sarah Hill