



## The Power of Mentoring

### Mentoring:

To recognize and develop talent, and enable people to become more than they previously thought possible.

*CAUSE91 in Anaheim was my first CAUSE conference, and I was being exposed to far more than my relatively narrow experiences in student information systems. To my surprise, I found my horizons expanding to an extent and at a pace that I found quite dizzying. Where should I begin? How in the world could I become the next Brian Hawkins or Carole Barone? Did I even want to try? These questions were at the forefront of my thoughts when someone sat me (probably mistakenly) at the same dinner table as Brian Hawkins the night he received his CAUSE Award for Exemplary Leadership and Information Technology Excellence (ELITE). As I listened to the talk at the table, I realized that I wanted to ask that all-important question: Just how should I take the next step? So I asked.*

*Brian paused, gazing thoughtfully at me, and replied, "Find yourself a mentor, and if you can't find one, call me." Yes!, I thought. That is just what I need: someone who has been there before and who can help me avoid costly mistakes. When I relayed this important insight to my CIO at UC-Davis, Carole Barone, she replied with some exasperation, "Kent, you idiot, what do you think I am doing?"*

**M**entoring happens in many ways. Sometimes it occurs as a direct one-on-one relationship or involvement (for those who are quick enough to realize it is happening), and other times it takes the form of a philosophy or methodology instilled in an organization. It is my belief that growing an organization requires the philosophical approach to mentoring but that this must be combined with practical "things to do" in order for the idea to take hold.

### The Reality

Let's start with what doesn't work. It doesn't work when you walk into your organization and blithely state: "We are going to start a mentoring program." That works as a vision statement, but it doesn't really *do* much except start people thinking, "This is what he/she gets paid the big bucks for?" Instilling a mentoring mindset within an organization takes both time (sometimes years) and perseverance. It

suggests moving away from a model that many of us have used and still adhere to: hiring a limited number of highly paid and highly trained professionals and loading them with the work. It supports developing career paths from function to function with varying levels of skills and experience. It suggests adding more staff at lower compensation levels. And it requires making a commitment to overstaffing to accomplish these objectives.

Unfortunately, today there are 7.5 people for every 10 information technology jobs. This statistic is predicted to hold for at least ten more years. Thus we are experiencing longer vacancy periods as we struggle to find qualified staff. In higher education we are constantly competing for the same resources within our own institutions: departments hire technical staff away from each other and from the central technology organization, and vice versa, increas-

ing salaries. We also compete with the private sector. In this environment, is it really feasible to believe that we will be able to hold on to our few highly paid and skilled technical staff when pre-IPO Internet startup companies, as well as established companies, are offering potential millions in stock options and salaries easily 30 percent better than our top ranges? I know the answer to that question. I lost three of my four highly skilled Oracle database administrators to corporate raids in a



six-month period, and it took me two years to replace them and institute a mentoring model that would provide some insulation from another similar event.

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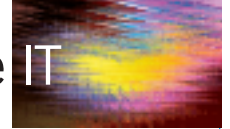
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### Things to Do

*First, develop your staff in-house.* Focus on creating career paths that advance staff from entry-level positions to more highly skilled and highly paid roles. For example, create a foundation of basic computer skills via operations staff in your data center, via your PC-based support staff, or via internships with the local computer science department. Find the promising students and staff members who learn quickly, work hard, and play well with others. Provide technical training followed immediately by

conferences for expanding the understanding and scope of information technologies. Utilize topic-specific training on subjects like UNIX/NT systems administration or database administration to develop the hard-to-find specialized technical skills. Use books to supplement the acquisition of technical and management skills. Consider how to develop the whole person, not just the technical skills. This can include training in facilitation, contract management and negotiation, project management, problem solving, customer service, and

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projects that help determine if this staff will be capable in the field. Normally organizations set aside 2–3 percent of their total staff salaries for training and development. Best-in-class organizations set aside 6–7 percent, and bleeding-edge organizations go as high as 10 percent. From here, the staff can elect to move into applications development, Web development, or systems administration. From those areas, qualified staff can move into project management, database administration, or senior management. Overstaffing now becomes a factor, because in order to free up time for staff to take training courses and to work on these projects outside their normal jobs, you must have more staff than ordinarily needed in various functions. On the other hand, you will find that overstaffing helps improve morale, increase coverage, strengthen loyalty to the department, and raise retention figures. It also helps mitigate the impact when you do lose people (and you will) to other companies, institutions, or departments.

*Second, use a variety of sources for training and development.* For example, consider

writing. Most of all, however, ensure that these newly trained staff members get to work in the field to gain the experience that can never, by its nature, be acquired through a class.

*Third, be realistic.* You won't succeed with each person you send through the career pipeline. You will lose some people to organizations paying the big bucks. Some people won't work out because of productivity or attitude problems or for other reasons. Document any problems, and make sure that you follow institutional policy and procedures in managing performance issues. Establish a close working relationship with staff members in your central human resources department. Often they can help ensure that you understand the implications of any decisions you make and that you reduce any liability from missteps. Consider adding a new function to your department, a local human resources analyst. This person can help pull some of the routine issues away from managers, giving them more time for day-to-day mentoring. He or she can also provide an immediate sounding board for on-the-spot



personnel issues.

*Fourth, develop sources for mentors.* It is easy to say “find a mentor,” but it is far less simple to do so. In some cases you can hire the right skills—for example, you could hire a technical manager with a background in training others. You could contract with a vendor (e.g., Sun Microsystems, Dell, or Oracle) to provide you with senior-level technical staff who will come to your department twice a week. You could hire contractors who will stay on-site for six months. Work with both your central human resources and your purchasing departments to have these contracts predefined so that you can easily add skill sets to your organization when necessary.

*Finally, compensate appropriately.* This can include considering annual equity reviews for staff who have demonstrated the skills and experience that warrant higher pay. If you are bound by restrictive pay structures, contact your central human resources department and dis-

cuss ideas such as broadbanding and offer to pilot such an effort.

**Conclusion**

The solutions we use to recruit, retrain, and retain our staffs must be innovative and pervasive. It is no longer in the best interests of the institution to set up models that hire and are dependent on a few highly trained, highly paid technical staff. If we spread the wealth, we will find that we can withstand any corporate raid. We can ensure greater coverage of our technical resources. We can develop the organizational mentality that helping others to improve is perceived by management as an essential element in any growing organization.

Some people believe that leadership relies on decisive decision making, while others point to vision and strategic planning as key. I believe that successful leadership contains all those aspects, but I also believe that you cannot be a successful leader if you don't recog-

nize and cultivate talent within your organization. I had the benefit of two mentors—Carole Barone, now Vice President of EDUCAUSE, and Lana Moffitt, Director of Information Resources at UC-Davis—and their attention was not reserved for me alone. Like Carole and Lana, I intend to continue to recognize and develop the strengths of those around me, whether or not they realize what is happening. That is what makes me want to get out of bed in the morning. That is mentoring.

**Kent Kuo is Associate Director of Communications Resources at the University of California, Davis. Beyond his professional mentors, he is constantly being mentored by his wife (Debbie) and two children (Alexa and Ryan). In 1991 he transitioned from the position of assistant registrar into the field of information technology and is now responsible for the IT department's budget, human resources, and administrative operations, as well as the growth of campus technologies in networking and telecommunications.**



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