

## Empowering Youth: Qualities of an Effective Mentor

I have discovered that empowering, inspiring or motivating youth is both an enduring and rewarding process of gradually remolding their mindsets. The most important goal of empowering youth is to encourage social, emotional, psychological and physical independence. It is the ability, authority or sanction for youth to confidently make positive decisions that affect both them and others. Youth empowerment is a multi-tasking challenge that requires an aptly prepared worker to undertake.

Many times, we involve incapable people in the business of youth, out of desperation and dire need for mentors. In doing this, we fail to realize that a 'wrong' relationship or wrong influence could worsen the affected youth's outlook on life and its caretakers i.e. mentors, parents, relatives, counselors, religious leaders, teachers etc. By 'wrong' relationships, I mean an involvement of an inconsistent mentor; an emotionally abusive mentor; a weak-willed mentor; an untrained or ignorant mentor etc. These classifications of mentors could actually worsen the emotional states of youth in several ways.

Thus, in studying the process of youth mentorship and empowerment, it is necessary to **Assess, Train and Monitor** mentors so that relationships are not only mutually beneficial to the youth and mentor involved, but also helps the mentor understand personal traits, qualities, characteristics, strengths and weaknesses suitable or potentially dangerous for the task ahead.

Therefore, in the next couple blog postings, I'd be exploring qualities and characteristics of effective mentors necessary for youth empowerment, inspiration and motivation.

The first time I met 17 year old John, my 'Little Brother' from the Big Brother Big Sister program (BBBS NY Chapter), I knew I had a daunting task ahead of me. John wasn't really the typical bad kid; he was just at a place where he was being influenced by a more misguided older brother. He had been suspended from school for fighting another boy because of a girl; his closest friends were gang members, even though he denied being a part of any, he had run away from home a couple times; and had started sleeping out of his grandmother's house, who was his caretaker. These and more were the reasons why his concerned grandmother felt the need to find him a suitable mentor through the BBBS program.

We took to each other like white on rice, as he quickly opened up to me the moment he realized that he could trust me. Our friendship grew, and the more it did, the more he got me involved in his life. Few months down the line, he alongside his brother and friends were arrested for trying to rob an undercover cop. I was the first one called. I was disappointed at him, but at the same time honored that I was his first choice of confidence. I stood by him, believing his story of not being involved in the incident even though all else said otherwise, attending all his court proceedings, keeping in touch with his family etc. Fortunately his charges were dropped. That incident put things into perspective for him. He called me for more advice, ex-communicated most of his friends, and is currently in college working towards his degree. His grandmother and Aunt still haven't stopped talking about his love, respect and admiration for me; something they say they'd never seen him have for anyone all his life.

Looking back at that experience, and many others that impacted my life goal of inspiring and giving hope to in-need Youth, I decided to share some of the qualities that I acquired and honed during our life

changing journey. These and more have helped me navigate the stormy sea of youth mentoring, and have continually helped me achieve success in this field.

Therefore, in sharing these, I hope that people will become more aware of the situations youth are faced with and how to deal with them cautiously to avoid hurt, disappointment and withdrawal.

### **1. Compassion and Empathy:**

It is necessary to Become-Your-Mentee, in order to understand their journey. You have to assume their role and position to fully comprehend their situation. For instance, with BBBS John, I was dealing with a young man who was being raised by his aunt and grandmother because his father had abandoned him at a young age, and his incarcerated mother did not seem very interested in his well-being.

John grew up believing that he had done something wrong to deserve his plight. He did not understand how he could trust anyone to love him, if his birth parents did not find him worthy of being loved. This mindset resulted in several rebellious acts, which had become his method of expressing his anger and pain. I quickly learned that of him, realizing that what he needed was compassion and empathy, and not the harsh chastising, scolding, cursing and confidence-depleting words he had grown used to hearing and believing his entire life. I completely immersed myself in his situation, believing him and in him, even when it made no sense to, and trying hard to really understand what he went through at every given point. That empathy helped calm him down as he gradually became comfortable sharing his pains, heartaches and disappointments with me. This was not only therapeutic for him, but it also helped build our trust-bond.

Empathy and compassion, most importantly can only stem from a genuine concern and **LOVE** for your mentee. They fuel **TRUST**, which is crucial for the survival of any mentor-mentee relationship. They also create room for a mentor to help a mentee see different ways of resolving different situations. My mentees most often become inclined to trying my suggested solutions or avenues of resolutions once they feel I have their best interest at heart.

Notice how I did not use Sympathy. This is because Empathy is NOT Sympathy. While empathy is a deeper understanding, an unspoken connection, a compassionate sharing of one's plight or painful condition; sympathy is more of an understanding of the condition without the deep experience involved.

Sympathizing with youth could be dangerous. It sometimes sends a message of 'while I acknowledge your pain and trauma, you are alone in its experience' or 'I see you are suffering, but I do not know how to help you right now'; while on the other hand, empathy indicates that you are a partner in the painful experience. The former could result in the youth distancing themselves emotionally and physically from the mentor, a withdrawal into loneliness for lack of anticipated connection and/or even a more traumatic experience during their time of pain.

In other words, to successfully inspire youth, a mentor must be consistently compassionate and empathic to all of a mentee's every experience, whether good or bad. **SHARE YOUR MENTEE'S LAUGHTERS AS WELL AS THEIR PAINS.** It goes a long way.

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Re:LIFE is a nonprofit organization determined to educate, equip, encourage, cultivate and motivate young disconnected males to become entrepreneurs in diverse fields that will spur economic growth, reduce unemployment, and increase fiscal responsibility in our communities. This entrepreneurial focus will come alongside educational, career and leadership preparations in five different areas of concentration.

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