Eight Guideposts for Developing
Group Mentoring Programs
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September, 2020

The following eight guideposts can help organizations to design effective group mentoring programs, and to put aspects of “mentoring” into their efforts:

1. Be intentional by integrating “mentoring” into the program design
2. Designate an optimum number of mentors and mentees for each group
3. Determine a consistent & functional meeting schedule
4. Match mentors and mentees based on their strengths and needs
5. Create a safe place for mentees to share
6. Train mentors on group facilitation
7. Standardize the “flow of activities” for sessions
8. Use fun, inspiring, educational curriculum

1. Be intentional by integrating “mentoring” into the program design.

Programs that describe their services as “group mentoring” should be intentional about designing their programs so that actual “mentoring” occurs. This isn’t always the case, as some group efforts feature educational support, fieldtrips, and other enrichment activities, without pausing to consider what “mentoring” actually is. Although these programs can be highly beneficial, they are not necessarily “mentoring programs.” To understand what youth mentoring is, one need only to look at the one-to-one mentoring model; it’s clear that in the one-to-one mentoring, a primary focus is on the development of trusting relationships. As trust is built up, the mentees become more comfortable about revealing their true selves; this helps mentors to better understand each young person and their specific needs—and these strengthened connections lead to healthy mentoring relationships. In summary, to create a group mentoring program where mentoring actually occurs, put a strong focus on relationship building.

2. Designate an optimal number of mentors and mentees for each group

“An optimal number” means designating the number of mentors and mentees that will help the program to:

- promote the development of close relationships,
- give each mentee ample sharing time, and attention, and;
- allow the groups to run smoothly.

There are countless possibilities in regards to numbers of mentees a program might serve, as well as ratios of mentors to mentees. As a mentoring consultant, over the past 25 years when working with organizations new to group mentoring, I often suggest that they begin their design process by considering a 2:8 model—2 mentors per 8 mentees.
Why 8 Mentees Per Group?

- Providing the mentees with the ability to share is a core tenant of group mentoring. If there are say, 14 mentees in a group, and each is asked “How was your week?” it may take up too much time. Plus, larger groups are intimidating for those that fear public speaking.
- If there is a potential for mentees to act out or to lose focus, groups much larger than 8 mentees can be extremely hard to manage.
- With a number of mentees much smaller than 8, the result will be that it will take more mentors serve to serve fewer mentees. This can work but it negates the benefit of \textit{not} having to recruit, screen, and train a high number of mentors.

Why 2 Mentors Per Group?

- In 2 mentor groups, when 1 mentor is absent the group stays together and the sense of safety and confidentiality is maintained. In groups facilitated by solo mentors, if the mentor is absent it forces the group to be absorbed by another group; not only can the sense of team be lost, but mentees are less likely to share sensitive information to unfamiliar people.
- Co-mentors can be matched based on their strengths and deficit areas, as well as other characteristics. (A common criterion for matching pairs: an experienced mentor is paired with a less-seasoned one.)
- Co-mentors can work together to manage disruptions in the group, and to redirect mentees who have lost focus during discussion and activities.
- Co-mentors can discuss how things are going, including how each mentee is doing, how the curriculum is working, etc.
- Co-mentors can share the curriculum delivery workload.
- When a large number mentors are used within each group, for example 4:8, it reduces the time and cost benefits that come with recruiting and onboarding fewer mentors
- When more mentors are used in each group, there can be a loss of “mentee-centricity,” as mentors may dominate conversations.

Additionally, when a greater number of mentors are used, it’s not unusual for mentor attendance to fall off, as volunteers often believe that other mentors will always be there to step in. When a mentor’s attendance declines, mentees can feel a sense of betrayal—the same betrayal that they experience when their individual mentor isn’t showing up for a one-to-one match.

3. Determine a consistent and functional meeting schedule
The use of “consistent” and “functional” here means creating a meeting schedule that will help the program meet its objectives. In addition to developing trusting relationships, determine a schedule that will lead to the building of mentees skills, knowledge, confidence and competence in targeted areas (if this is part of a program’s intended outcomes).

Settling on a meeting schedule includes determining the:
- timeframe for each group session (e.g. 1 hr., 2 hrs., etc.)
• number of sessions per month (e.g. 2, 3, 4) and;
• number of overall sessions in a given time period (e.g. 10, 15, or 30 sessions)—this time period is called the “mentoring cycle”
• weeks off between mentoring cycles (if any)

Taking the timeframes outlined above into consideration, here’s an example of a group mentoring program meeting schedule that is running three, eight-week sessions:
• meet once a week for 60-minutes at a time over an eight-week mentoring cycle
• take a two-week break
• begin the second eight-week mentoring cycle
• take a two-week break
• begin the third eight-week mentoring cycle

The weeks off in between mentoring cycles can be helpful to keep the participants and staff fresh. This can also create the time to evaluate the activities and curriculum, and to replace any mentors or mentees that have dropped out of the program.

In general, it is good to hold frequent meetings (weekly or bi-monthly). Conversely, there can be too many weekly sessions, as it can be a hardship for both the students and the mentors to ask them to show up more than once a week.

And, too many overall sessions can also be problematic. For example, it could be overwhelming to require participants and staff to meet weekly for 50 straight weeks.

Additional Constraints for Scheduling

• School-based Group Mentoring Programs. These efforts are subject to the constraints of the school calendar, and students’ class schedules; many schools have short class periods, and students can only meet for 30 to 40 minutes. (Onsite programs that meet after school can usually have longer meetings.)

Life Situations of the Mentees. While it may be easier to get mentees to attend weekly in a school-based program as they are required to show up for school, it can be difficult for those mentees who are facing other situations. For instance, bi-monthly meetings may make more sense for youth who have just reentered society from a juvenile facility, as these individuals may have transportation issues, court and probation appearances, victim restitution, etc. that they are tasked with dealing with.

4. Match mentors and mentees based on their strengths and needs.
In the 2:8 ratio of mentors to mentees (and even 3:10/3:12), a thoughtful matching process should be implemented for paring mentor to mentee, mentors to mentees, and mentees to mentees. Matching strategies can consider participant strengths, weaknesses, needs, interests, and personality traits.
Considerations for Matching Mentor to Mentor

- **Mutual Chemistry:** Do the two individuals like and respect each other, and will they enjoy working together? This is so important that some programs hold one or more events or trainings so that mentors can get to know each other prior to being matched.

- **Match by Competence and Experience.** A primary aim of the matching process is to place at least one competent, confident mentor within each group, and to balance experience levels; e.g., match the most seasoned mentor with the least experienced individual. It is helpful to have one mentor in each group who is high on the “relationship expert” scale. This is especially important when it comes to facilitating group discussions, and in managing disruptive mentees.

- **Match by Assessing Individual Characteristics.** There is no magic formula here, but programs should at least consider factors like racial and ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic backgrounds, gender, gender identification, and so forth. Other possibilities are to pair opposites, such as: old with young, introverts with extraverts, professionals with tradespersons, artists with accountants, academics with the street-wise, and so on.

Considerations for Matching Mentors with Specific Groups of Mentees

To match the mentor pair to the group of mentees they will be best suited for, considerations include:

- **Competence Levels:** based on their combined competence, can this pair effectively manage the group, including facilitating group discussions and handling any potential acting out?

- **Potential Acceptance by a Particular Group of Mentees:** Base on their backgrounds, interests, personality styles (such as introvert with and extravert), mentoring philosophies (e.g. empathetic person with a strict disciplinarian), likely be accepted by a specific group of mentees?

Considerations for Matching Mentees with Mentees

- **Match by Age Ranges.** It makes sense that 10-year-olds and 17-year-olds have different cognitive abilities and interests, so they don’t mix well within the group mentoring setting. Many group efforts keep the age range within around 2 to 3 years (e.g., matching together 11, 12 and 13-year olds).

- **Match by Developmental Levels.** Sometimes an older, but immature, mentee will do better in a group made up of younger students. Conversely, sometimes a younger, but mature and highly functioning youth can be placed with older mentees.

- **Match by Creating a “Good Mix.”** When possible, put together a mix of mentees based on leadership qualities and motivation levels (high and low), along with their potential for acting out. For example, don’t match together the 8 most likely mentees to act out into one group, and then 8 highly-motivated leaders in another group. Having this good mix is important for group identification (“Oh, I get it, we are all the screw-ups!”), and for the ability smoothly manage the groups.
• Match by Gender. There is no simple answer for whether a program should match all the same gender, or to mix genders. Many times, programs that serve elementary-aged mentees tend to develop mixed gender groups. Conversely, some (but not all) programs place the same gender for late middle school- and high school-aged students. Whether to mix genders or not often comes down to student focus and group management, and the related question, “Will mixing genders potentially create hard to manage disruptions?”

• Match by Assessing Other Individual Characteristics. Consider hobbies and interests, personality styles, race, ethnicity, socio-economic backgrounds.

• Match for Potential for Positive Chemistry. In the end, as with making a one-to-one match, sometimes it comes down to intuition -- a “gut feeling” – does it seem like this group will enjoy being together, and that they will get along?

A Final Word on Matching. All of the factors just described point out strategies for making proper matches when there is a large pool of candidates to draw from. In a real-world situation, it could occur that after an extended recruitment effort, only 2 adult volunteers step forward—in this case, these will be the mentors that will be utilized. Also, it might also occur that only 8 mentees at a recreational center show up for a program, and in all likelihood, this will be the 8 mentees that will be served.

5. Create a safe place for mentees to share
It is important to create a nurturing environment, a place where mentees can feel comfortable enough to express what is going on in their lives. When young people believe that they can reveal their true selves, group mentoring can be transformative. But a caution—mentee sharing in the small group setting can also be one the hardest element of the program to successfully navigate.

When you ask young people to reveal themselves in the small group setting, anything can happen. Shy mentees can be mortified when asked to speak in the group. On occasion, those who have experienced trauma can disclose too much, leaving lightly-trained mentors not knowing how to respond. Mentees can be cruel to each other, participating in name calling and putting one another down. As students share, confidential, sensitive information about a fellow mentee, or about someone outside of the group could be revealed. Students might brag about drug use, or committing crimes, or about their sexual activity.

This all may sound frightful, but without risk, there is no reward. And, know there are strategies to managing these and other risks. How to run manage potentially disruptive groups will be discussed further in this documents next section: “6. Train Mentors on Group Facilitation.”

The following program design elements can increase the odds that group sharing will run more smoothly:
• Bring Together a Good Mix of Mentees. This was mentioned it matching, but it bears repeating. When you mix motivated with unmotivated, and leaders with disrupters, you have a chance; very often, the students who are leaders will step in and, for instance, call for fairness or restraint from one of their peers. So, for a pilot effort, it is best to assemble a relatively highly functioning group of mentees. This can provide an opportunity for both mentors and staff to become seasoned, without having to put out too many fires.

• Place at Least One “Relationship Expert” Mentor in Each Group. This can be a current or retired school teacher, coach, counselor, social worker, youth program coordinator, etc. Someone who has “been there and done that” is likely to be able to handle almost anything that comes up within the group setting.

• Develop Group Norms/Rules Early On. Group norms or rule can be created before the first session where students will be asked to share. It’s good to have a discussion with the group of mentees and point out that it’s good to have group rules, so that everyone can feel safe. To get buy-in, ask them what the rules should be, then write them down on a white board or flip chart as they come up with them.

Examples of typical group mentoring rules:

- Support and encourage each other
- No put-downs, making fun, or attempts to embarrass
- One person talks at a time
- Keep your hands to yourself
- Stay engaged in group activities
- What’s said in the group, stays in the group (confidentiality)
- Do the right thing

As mentees come up with group rules, mentors can add one more rule that will prevent debate at a time when a mentee might lobby that they didn’t actually break the rules. This overarching rule can be stated as “no disruptive behavior,” or “do the right thing.”

Addressing “confidentiality,” is not as simple as the injunction, “What is said in the group, stays in the group.” Although mentees are encouraged to be candid as they share, they should also be forewarned that some things might be too sensitive to disclose in the group—and that if they share something extremely personal, there’s a chance that one of their peers could breach confidentiality. Mentees should also be cautioned that some topics are not appropriate for group discussion, such as gossip and “other people’s business.” Mentors can be trained to intervene when sensitive issues around confidentiality areas arise.
• Have a Plan for Managing Mentees Who Might be Disruptive. A great benefit of using at least two mentors in each group is that co-mentors can work together to handle disruptive mentees. For example, if a particular student continually acts out, one of the mentors can walk the mentee out of the group to discuss their behavior, while the other mentor stays with the group. (More on this topic in “6. Train mentors on group facilitation,” below.)

• Never Ask Shy Mentees to Share. Find ways of encouraging sharing, while at the same time making it optional for mentees to talk in the group. Speaking publically is the number one fear of many individuals, and forcing them to share can exacerbate their fears, and even cause them to exit the program. And, don’t say to a mentee, “Oh, I see you are shy—you don’t have to share,” as publically labeling a mentee as ‘shy’ can further traumatize them.

6. Train mentors on group facilitation
(Note: The previous section, “5. Create a safe place for mentees to share,” covers concepts that can also be used when training group mentors.”)

*Effective Practices for Mentoring: 4th Edition* establishes a baseline minimum of two hours for the pre-match mentor training. Group mentoring utilizes the same basic mentoring concepts and practices as the one-to-one model, and so group mentors should get the baseline training plus further training on how to facilitate group mentoring.

This section, “Train Mentors on Group Facilitation,” will necessarily be short because of space limitations. The basic concepts of training group mentors on how to best facilitate this model could double or triple the size of this document. So instead, a few of the basics are covered below.

Basic Mentoring Concepts and Practices that Should be Incorporated into Group Mentoring.

• In group mentoring as in the one-to-one model, volunteers should remember that mentor as a wise and trusted friend—a person who wants the best for their youth.
• Fixing or changing the mentee is not the primary goal of a successful mentor.
• Trying to develop a trusting relationship is the primary goal of a youth mentor. The three most important things in mentoring are the 3-R’s: “relationship, relationship, relationship.”
• The not-so-good mentor thinks for the mentee, by telling them what to do. The successful mentor helps their mentee to think for themselves—they want the mentee to come up with their own answers, as this empowers the young person. In other words, not so good mentors make up their mentees minds for them—successful mentors help their mentees to make up their minds.
• A 1995 landmark study on youth mentoring called the unsuccessful mentors “directive” and “prescriptive.” Prescriptive mentors believes they are the answer or the “pill” for
the mentee. Mentees are very sensitive and perceptive, and they are turned off by this type of mentor.

- Upholding your commitment to your group of mentees is as important as upholding your commitment in a one-to-one match. It is likely that if a mentor stops showing up for their group sessions, one or more mentees in the group will feel abandoned and betrayed—and they will be worse off than if you had never tried mentoring them at all.

### A Few Key Strategies for Maintaining Discipline in the Group Mentoring Setting

1. Group management comes easy for some people and not for others, but effective strategies can also be learned over time. Those who want enhance their understanding can do so by watching more skillful mentors at work. There are also many articles, books and videos available on topics such as enhancing communication skills, providing trauma informed care, and conflict resolution.

2. Every group dynamic is different, and each has its own cast of characters that you will come to know. Many personality types are positive, and easy to work with, but be prepared for the following types: bullying, isolated, helpless, hyperactive, talkative, and uncooperative. Those players may not appear in every group, but it’s wise to be prepared to encounter some of those types.

3. Ineffective mentors nag. Mentees either tune nagging mentors out, or try to get them to nag even more.

4. If a mentee starts to escalate in anger or anxiety, go the other direction with your emotions. Talk softly and stay calm.

5. Sometimes you can “play the fairness card.” E.g. “Come on, this over-talking is not fair to the rest of the group. Right now, Joni is not getting an opportunity to get her point across!”

6. Don’t embarrass mentees as a method of control or punishment, as they will retaliate or withdraw.

7. Try to focus on the positive — not what they are doing wrong but what they are doing right. If they are doing something wrong, don’t necessarily point it out but tell them what they need to do to correct their actions.

8. If there are at least two mentors in each group, if and when a mentee gets disruptive, one of the mentors can walk the disruptive mentee out of the group and give them “the talk.” It usually helps if the warning comes with a bit of sweetener. E.g. “We really want you to stay in the group. You are smart, likeable, and you have been such a big and positive part of what we’ve been able to accomplish—but today we can see that you are repeatedly talking over others. Is there something going on?
We’d like to give you another chance to be part of the sharing—do you feel like you are ready to settle in or do you want a couple more minutes?”

Helping Mentees to Problem Solve. Don’t be a Global Positioning System (GPS) mentor, telling the mentee what to so every step of the way. Almost all of us are familiar with finding directions with a GPS—it tells us what to do at every corner, at every decision point. But if our GPS goes down, and we have to try to find our way to a destination that has numerous turns, most of us would be lost. If you continually solve mentees’ problems the pattern is the same—they won’t know how to solve problems on their own because you’ve always told them what they need to do.

Three Step Problem Solving Model for Mentors.

The simple problem solving model shown below can be used by mentors as they help mentees to reach their own solutions. This is a key tenant of mentoring: Do not tell the mentee what they need to do.

Sometimes when a mentor asks a good question, a mentee will begin talking and the words will come out of their mouth and back into their ears—and they are hearing themselves solve their own problems in real time.

There are any number of conversation openers that mentors can use, but many have successfully utilized the following framework as a guideline.

When the mentee comes to you with a problem, ask:

1. Please tell me more about what’s going on.

2. Know anybody else that has been in a similar situation? What did they do? (Or, have you been in a similar situation. What did you do?)

3. What do you think you might do? Do you have any ideas? (Asking them to come up with “ideas” allows them to think of a number of options without having to come up with the “one solution.” This can help them to feel less defensive.

Again, mentors don’t have to use these specific questions, but the goal is to encourage them talk so that they can generate ideas — and then you can help guide them to a healthy response.

When the mentee come up with a potential solution:

• If they have a healthy response, then “affirm.”
  o Sounds good to me! Is that something you could try?
• If they have an unhealthy response, do the “cost-benefit analysis”:
  o You could do that, but what might happen? (Help them to understand possible negative consequences)

7. Standardize the “flow of activities” for mentoring sessions
Many group mentoring experts agree that the more structure provided for group mentoring sessions, the better. In fact, new mentors tend to crave structure. There is no more uneasy feeling than walking into a room full of young people who are looking at to be the person in charge, while you are silently wondering, “What should I do now?”

One sure way to provide structure (along with flexibility) is to use a “flow of activities template.” This provides an ongoing format for mentors to work together to decide who is going to do what, and when.

Below is a sample schedule for a typical 60-minute group mentoring session:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time &amp; Activity</th>
<th>Description, Including Who Leads</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3:30 – 3:40 Icebreaker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:40 – 3:50 Standard Sharing Exercise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:50 – 4:10 Educational Module</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:10 – 4:20 I Big Thing I Learned</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:20 – 4:30 Refreshments, Adjourn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Like a teacher’s lesson plan, the flow of activities format helps to keep the group mentoring program on schedule. And as far as being flexible, mentors can experiment by changing the sequences of activities, and by having different mentors take the lead on facilitation. Additionally, if they are willing, a mentee or group of mentees can be asked to periodically facilitate an icebreaker or exercise. Adding to the mix, the program can recruit guest speakers to present, and if schedule and budget allow, periodic field trips can be taken.

Of course, if there is an urgent topic that students want to discuss, such as a tragedy occurring, or a major disruption to the students’ lives, then the scheduled activities should be tossed and mentors should help facilitate the discussion.
8. Use Fun, Inspiring, Educational Curriculum
The key to providing warmers and exercises to young people is “interaction, interaction, interaction.” Mentees don’t want to sit on their hands listening to long lectures on life lessons by pedantic mentors. Instead, they have a desire to be involved, to be challenged, to come up with ideas, to work together, and to have fun and laugh—while showing how smart and creative they can be.

Activities that inspire this kind of interaction can be found at no cost all over the Web. Staff and mentors may have to spend a little time, but try to find curriculum by various topics inputted into search engines: e.g. “social and emotional learning, grit, growth mindset, conflict resolution, leadership, organizational skills, social justice, diversity, goal setting,” etc. Further qualify these terms by pairing them with words like: “student, youth, group mentoring, exercises, warmers, icebreakers, activities.”

Remember that exercises need to be fun and interactive. Below is one example of an activity that could have resulted in a long and boring lecture by a guest speaker, but instead, it was designed to start with a relatively short presentation, and then a fun and challenging exercise for the mentees.

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**Build a Company: A Group Mentoring Exercise**

**Objectives**
Mentees listen to a guest speaker who has successfully developed their own business. Then they work together in small groups to create a hypothetical business, and they share their findings with the larger group. This exercise can help students to consider what goes into creating a company; it can also be used to focus on topics such as “leadership,” “finding your own and each other’s strengths,” and “teamwork.”

**Materials**
- Large piece of poster board for each team
- Multiple colored markers for each team
- Tape to affix completed work to the wall.

**Time**
50 Minutes

**Instructions**
1. Tell the mentees that in a few minutes you are going to divide them up into groups, and they will be creating their own company/business, but first someone will provide a short talk on the topic.
2. If possible, ask a speaker to come in and talk for about 10 minutes on a topic such as, “How I Created My Company,” or, “How the Company Worked that I was Employed By.” If you can’t get a guest speaker, have one of mentors could talk about when he/she was involved with a business. Here are some key points (for both guest speakers, or mentors):
   - Describe the business, including what product or service it provided.
   - How the mentor (or guest speaker) got involved
   - What the speaker’s job/role was
   - Roles and responsibilities of others (briefly)
   - Financial issues, especially during the start-up phase
   - Any obstacles that may have arisen
   - Benefits of being involved in this company
   - The main thing the mentor or guest speaker learned, as they worked for this company
   - What they like or love about their experience creating a business.
   - What encouraging words around business development might you have for the mentees?

3. Give each group a poster board and markers, and ask them to take about 20 minutes and create a hypothetical company. They can use the poster board to write down certain things that will describe their business. (If they are having trouble, mentors can jump in and assist—but don’t take over.) Have them answer these questions on their poster board. Mentors may want to write these questions on a white board or flip chart so they can see them as they work.
   - Company name?
   - Where located?
   - Service or product provided?
   - Draw an image of the product or service
   - Draw a logo (if you can come up with one)
   - Cost?
   - Who is the boss?
   - Who is the marketing/advertising person?
   - Who keeps track of the money?
   - Who are the workers--what do they do?
   - Do you have a slogan? (Like Nike’s Just Do It!)
   - Can you create a short jingle about the product or service?
   - Why is your product or service better than another company that provides something similar?

3. Ask each group to present their company to the other groups. It could be one person giving the presentation, two, or the entire group. If they’ve created a slogan, encourage them to shout it out together. If they’ve created a jingle, ask them to sing it together.

4. Praise each group for their efforts!
Debrief

1. Did this give you an idea of how to put a business or company together?
2. Were you able to match the strengths of each person in your group to the tasks required within the business (please give us examples).
3. Can you see that businesses have many kinds employees—bosses, marketing people, workers, etc.—and that each person in the company has specific skills and strengths that help the company to succeed?
4. What are some ways that someone could learn, if they wanted to start a certain type of business?
   - Work in the kind of business that they are interested in
   - Read about it (books and online)
   - Interview someone who has worked in that type of business
   - Go to school to learn about business in general, as well as the specific type of business they are interested in.

This is just one example of how to turn what could be a relatively boring lecture into a shorter lecture combined with a pep talk, and then a fun and interactive exercise where mentees work together to show off their creativity!

Note that the instructions used in the exercise above were constructed using a specific format:
   - Objectives
   - Materials
   - Time
   - Instructions
   - Debrief

If you are pulling exercises from disparate resources, it is a good practice to integrate them into a standard format such as the one shown above. This way, “how to conduct the exercise” -- the what, why, how, how long, and so forth -- can be successfully communicated with the mentors who will be facilitating the exercise.

Good luck and happy group mentoring!