



July 31st, 2012 • [Comments Off on The Mentor's Way Rule #3: Create a Safe Place](#)

by *Rik Nemanick, Ph.D.*

Many mentors think their primary job is to give advice to their protégés. While advice can be an important tool of mentoring (although not as powerful as asking questions as we'll see in the next rule of mentoring), the mentors that are most successful focus on building trust with a protégé. Every time I talk to mentors and protégés who had effective and satisfying experiences, they point to the trust that they built as the foundation of their partnership. Trust is the true currency of mentoring; building a "trust account" between a protégé and mentor becomes a powerful platform that can help a protégé grow in many ways:

- **Expressing emotions.** All protégés have situations that are laden with emotion. They may be holding onto fear, frustration, anger, or doubts that get bottled up, creating a block to their growth and progress. A mentor who creates a safe place allows these emotions to be expressed without fear of judgment or reprisal. Like a pressure relief valve, expressing the emotions allows the protégé to blow off steam and think more clearly about the situation.
- **Dealing with difficulty.** Pent up emotions are usually tied to difficult situations. They get pent up because the protégé doesn't feel like she or he has anywhere to examine the situation and formulate a strategy for dealing with it. A mentor can provide a third-party perspective because he or she usually doesn't have a stake in the situation. It is the safe place that allows constructive problem solving to take place.
- **Taking risks.** The power of mentoring opens up when a protégé begins to learn. True learning occurs when a protégé moves outside of his comfort zone. If what was comfortable was already working, the situation wouldn't be causing stress for the protégé. Creating a safe place allows a protégé to try new things and take risks, knowing that he will have someone to support him. A mentor gives a protégé confidence to try new things, helps a protégé cope with setbacks that come with risks, and celebrates with the protégé when the risks pay off.
- **Building the relationship.** The trust built between a protégé and mentor pays off over time. The bonds that are built through a trusting partnership may help a protégé today, but they are even more valuable down the road, often when active mentoring has come to an end. The trust capital that a mentor and protégé built in the past creates a reserve that can be tapped when the protégé faces new challenges over time.

Trust grows slowly and naturally over time. There are some things that mentors and protégés can do to both accelerate that growth and protect it from damage:

1. **Get to know the whole person.** Many mentoring partnerships draw their boundaries around their professional selves. To find those commonalities that are the seeds of trust, devote time getting to know the whole person. Ask about family, hobbies, interests, and aspirations. I often advise partners in formal programs to spend their second meeting having a meal together and getting to know each other.
2. **Build momentum early.** The conventional wisdom holds that mentors and protégés should meet about once a month. That advice works once trust has been built, but works against growing trust more quickly. At the beginning, mentors and protégés are better served by meeting more frequently and building some momentum. Getting into the habit of meeting and discussing issues creates a solid foundation for mentoring more quickly. Meet every other week at the beginning of a partnership, and drop back to monthly after a few months when you feel that trust has grown sufficiently.
3. **Look for small wins.** Teresa Amabile has written about how powerful small wins are, creating the energy that fuels progress. Small wins also can help build a relationship in its early stages, creating an emotional bond that cements trust.
4. **Build the mentor's skills.** Trust can erode when working with a mentor who isn't skilled. As

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issues become more complex, the solutions become more nuanced. The advice-giving skills that worked for a mentor early on may begin to erode trust, causing a protégé to lose faith in the partnership. Spend time building your mentoring skills by reading articles and books, attending seminars, and seeking your own mentors and learning their craft.

5. **Maintain confidentiality.** The quickest way to drain your trust account is to break the confidence of your mentoring partner. Mentors and protégés need to establish early on whether their conversations are confidential, and what limits (if any) there are to that confidentiality. Being explicit up front will open the door to difficult conversations that will rely on the trust that confidentiality brings.
6. **Be patient.** Not all of us trust at the same speed. Some of us trust more quickly than others. Recognize that your mentoring partner may not trust as quickly as you do. If you trust more quickly, you may want to slow down and engage in more trust-building behaviors to let your mentoring partner catch up with you. Trust takes time to build, and the investment you make early will pay dividends over time.

To comment on this article or to learn more about mentoring, contact Rik Nemanick at [nemanick@leadership-effect.com](mailto:nemanick@leadership-effect.com)

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We must walk consciously only part way toward our goal, and then leap in the dark to our success.

- Henry David Thoreau