



# Successful Mentoring for Apprentices

by | **Stuart Bass**

A decorative graphic on the left side of the page features a large yellow triangle pointing to the right. To its left, there are two white rectangular areas, each containing a grey arrow pointing to the right. The background is a light grey gradient.

Pairing apprentices with experienced journeyworkers in a mentoring relationship is often critical to the success of an apprenticeship program.

## Mentoring—The Key to Knowledge Transfer During On-the-Job Training (OJT)

Creating supportive and effective mentoring relationships between journeyworkers and apprentices can be critical to ensuring the success of apprenticeship programs.

In addition to helping apprentices with the hands-on learning of practical skills, mentors may provide individual support that can help apprentices grow both personally and professionally.

This article will discuss the importance of mentoring in registered apprenticeship programs, the roles that mentors play and the advantages of mentoring programs.

### Mentors in Registered Apprenticeship Programs

Mentoring is best accomplished as part of a formal apprenticeship training program where:

- Classroom training provides apprentices with theory and general understanding
- Hands-on instruction applies the classroom lessons in a lab or in a controlled work environment
- Apprentices work alongside experienced professionals, also known as journeyworkers, to apply the knowledge and skills they have learned to real-life jobs that they will be expected to do every day
- Mentors receive a “train the trainer” course that includes communication skills, explanations of their roles and an introduction to learning styles.

To achieve the greatest success, mentoring programs should include a structured working relationship for journeyworkers and apprentices to reach specific goals and document their progress during OJT. Most apprentice learning occurs during OJT when journeyworkers pass on practical knowledge and apply what was taught in the classroom. For this reason, registered apprenticeships require at least 2,000 hours of OJT and 144 hours of classroom or related technical instruction (RTI) per year. This is a ratio of about 72% OJT to 28% RTI.

The transfer of knowledge from journeyworkers to apprentices for hands-on skill learning happens when they work together. Knowledge that is easier to pass on through lectures and note-taking is taught during RTI. Knowledge gained from personal experience is often more difficult to explain and best passed along through OJT. Journeyworkers take apprentices under their wing and show them how to do the job and share the “tricks of the trade.”

Journeyworkers also demonstrate skills that are transferable from one task to another. This may include foundational training that is essential for more than one occupation, such as safety, basic troubleshooting methods and other diagnostics. Soft skills such as communication, problem solving and navigating the workplace culture are also vital skills that apprentices need in order to excel in their work environment. Some journeyworkers may even offer instruction in life skills (e.g., how to set up a savings plan to buy a car or house). And some mentors have even provided family counseling, depending on the type of personal relationship they share with the apprentice.

### Train-the-Trainer Programs for Journeyworkers

Apprenticeship programs can bring structure to the mentor recruitment process and help to ensure that mentors are effective in their roles by providing a train-the-trainer program for journeyworkers. These programs acknowledge the journeyworkers’ wisdom, encourage them to view themselves as ambassadors for the program and teach them to be advocates for apprentices to succeed.

The programs should include information to help journeyworkers become familiar with the variety of learning styles among apprentices, how their communication matters and how to solve problems. They can also offer models for instruction to help mentors respond to their apprentices’ needs based on individual learning styles.

Designated mentors for apprenticeship programs need to understand their roles in the program and coordinate their teaching/coaching with the RTI in order to avoid teaching bad habits. It is helpful for mentors to be familiar with RTI content. The RTI provider or in-house trainers could offer summaries of the courses and assist the mentors with the design of the hands-on learning sessions to help synchronize RTI with OJT.

### Mentor Roles

Successful mentors fill at least nine essential roles:

1. **Teacher:** Journeyworkers share lessons learned from past mistakes or successes with apprentices to strengthen their relationship. The teaching role also requires mentors to step back and understand that apprentices are just beginning the learning process.
2. **Guide:** Mentors help apprentices navigate the job and the inner workings of an organization. The “behind the

scenes” or shop politics are not obvious to an outsider. Mentors should explain the unwritten workshop rules so that apprentices can become aware of the shop environment. This includes knowledge of special shop procedures that are not always documented.

3. **Counselor:** Journeyworkers should have a trusting and open relationship with apprentices that stresses confidentiality and mutual respect. Mentors must ensure confidentiality by not disclosing personal information shared by apprentices. Even though mentors act as teachers, it is equally important for them to listen to apprentices. Active listening shows respect and helps apprentices develop confidence.
4. **Advisor:** Mentors help apprentices develop professional interests and set realistic career goals. As advisors, journeyworkers talk to apprentices about what they want to learn and help them set career goals. Keep in mind that the process of setting goals must be flexible enough to accommodate changes in the workplace.
5. **Motivator:** This is a difficult yet essential mentor role. Motivation can be learned, though it is typically a natural inner drive that compels a person to be positive and succeed. Mentors can motivate apprentices through encouragement, support and incentives.
6. **Coach:** Journeyworkers help apprentices overcome difficult and challenging tasks by providing them with real-time, constructive feedback while they perform the tasks. Coaching is a complex and extensive process and not an easy skill to perform. Good mentors will admit when they do not know enough about the subject or circumstances and provide ways to learn. Mentors should also be aware that it is not appropriate to criticize apprentices in the presence of others and that some coaching is best done in private. No one likes to have faults or weaknesses pointed out in public.
7. **Role model:** Journeyworkers set an example of the values, ethics and professional practices of the workplace. Most apprentices, in time, emulate their mentors. Therefore, mentors must have high standards of professionalism, a solid work ethic and a positive attitude. They must exhibit the positive qualities of an experienced professional. Journeyworkers ensure that the next generation of workers maintains the skill level, work ethics and professionalism required to complete the job. Bad habits are hard to break. Mentors help ap-

prentices develop good work habits to develop productive skills.

8. **Door opener:** Journeyworkers help apprentices establish a network of contacts within the workplace. This gives apprentices a chance to meet other people for professional as well as social development. As door openers, mentors introduce apprentices to their own contacts to help build their network structure.
9. **Referral agent:** Since mentors are viewed as role models by the employer, they have credibility and can refer apprentices for opportunities as they arise. Employers may recognize the reputation of these mentors, which may add value to any referrals they may provide for apprentices.

At times, mentors may not even be aware they are performing these roles. The role depends on each journeyworker’s abilities and each apprentice’s needs. The journeyworker and apprentice determine which roles fit, and the relationship often evolves over time.

### Recruiting Good Mentors

As experienced professionals, journeyworkers are usually aware of the need to train new workers to keep their industry thriving. Those who possess the knowledge and skill developed over many years will one day retire and may feel the need to pass on what they have learned. A desire to share their life experiences is a characteristic of a good mentor.

## takeaways

- Mentors in registered apprenticeship programs are journeyworkers who work alongside apprentices to help them apply the skills and knowledge they have learned during classroom and related technical instruction.
- Offering a “train the trainer” program for journeyworkers brings structure to the mentor recruitment process and helps mentors learn their roles.
- Mentors fill many roles, including that of a coach who provides the apprentice with real-time constructive feedback. Mentors also can help apprentices establish a network of contacts within the workplace.
- Not all technicians have the necessary skills to be good mentors. Mentors should have good communication skills, a positive outlook and empathy for apprentices.
- Mentoring programs promote active learning, may help foster diversity in the workplace and provide career growth for mentors.

However, not all technicians have what it takes to become mentors. An effective apprenticeship program recruits journeyworkers with the right qualities. Apprenticeship sponsors should have an assessment process for selecting mentors since even those who excel in their jobs may not have what it takes to be a successful mentor. And some don't want that job. Strong communication skills, a positive outlook, empathy for the apprentices and problem solving are just a few of the qualities of a successful mentor. Other benchmarks for potential mentors include a clean safety record, model work habits and good attendance.

Many employers offer premium pay or an instructor's rate for employees during OJT to encourage journeyworkers to take on this extra role.

To ensure a safe work environment, registered apprenticeships require a certain ratio of apprentices to journeyworkers. Depending on the state, up to four journeyworkers may work with a single apprentice, or it may be a one-to-one relationship. However, there may be times that a journeyworker mentors more than one apprentice.

### Advantages of Mentoring Programs

#### *Providing Skilled Labor for Employers*

A common concern among employers is that OJT is expensive, and journeyworkers may be less productive when they are mentoring. Implementing an effective mentor program does require a short-term investment by the employer but should result in a long-term gain.

Companies that employ trained professionals can better guarantee the quality of their products or services. The OJT

requirements of a registered apprenticeship enable the apprentice to attain skills required to excel in their job.

Employers do have additional costs for classroom instruction and assigning the journeyworker to mentor the apprentice. This investment in the apprentice is one of the reasons for the wage progression during the apprenticeship. Apprentices earn a reduced rate for the job while they are learning and earn raises as they attain the skills to perform the job.

Employers see a return on their investment because the apprentices are productive throughout the apprenticeship and while earning a percentage of the full rate. The long-term gain grows during the careers of journeyworkers who have excelled in their crafts.

In addition, studies have shown that apprentices develop a commitment to their employer and acknowledge the investment in their careers. This record of job retention from sponsoring apprenticeship programs saves employers thousands of dollars in recruiting costs.

#### *Promoting Active Learning*

Mentoring programs promote the use of *active learning*, which occurs when apprentices demonstrate what they have learned by applying their knowledge to carry out a skill. Through a mentoring relationship, apprentices have many opportunities to practice their skills on the job with the guidance of their mentors.

Education experts, such as Edgar Dale (Foundations of Instructional Design Technology, E. Dale Cone of Experience) note that deep learning occurs when you combine and engage learning styles such as reading, hearing, seeing and doing. This is active learning, and the apprentice can retain much more of the lesson.

#### *Encouraging Diversity in the Workplace*

The current workforce includes different age groups that bring a variety of approaches to work. These groups sometimes have different attitudes about work ethic, authority and relationships. Not everyone fits into any one generalization, so the mentor must be open-minded and aware of the differences.

The U.S. workplace also includes folks of different ethnicities, religious beliefs, sexual orientations and countries of origin. Mentoring relationships offer the opportunity for learning about differences. Since apprentices are new to the jobsite, the mentor needs to check in with them to under-

## learn more

### Education

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### From the Bookstore

**Financial Tools for the Trades:  
A Survival Guide for Apprentices**

Port Jobs. 2015.

Visit [www.ifebp.org/books.asp?9103](http://www.ifebp.org/books.asp?9103) for more information.

bio



**Stuart Bass** started Progress Worx to align organizations to provide access to family-sustaining jobs. He helps industry stakeholders and intermediaries to form partnerships essential for apprenticeship and preapprenticeship programs to succeed. He can be contacted at sbass@progressworx.org or (215) 284-4218.

### Career Growth for Mentors

Mentors also find great satisfaction from their relationship to the apprentice. It offers them a chance to reflect on their own lives and assess what has worked and what didn't throughout their careers. Mentoring also enhances counseling skills when journeyworkers assist apprentices and advocate for them to succeed. Since joint union-management committees govern some apprenticeship programs, journeyworkers pass on the history of the apprenticeship and their union. ●

stand how they are coping, especially if they identify differently from the workplace majority in the work location. Maintaining an open curiosity about the wonders of humanity goes a long way to make the relationship fulfilling to both journeyworkers and apprentices.

Mentors can promote gender equality in the workplace by advocating for and encouraging appropriate communication and respect.

Discussing differences requires mutual respect. The journeyworker and apprentice can have many conversations that bring them closer. Open and honest discussions coupled with respect can open the door for effective communication to work through barriers.

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