

#7 – The Influence of Culture on Mentoring Relationships

Culture, in its broadest meaning, is the underlying fabric that holds together a person's world. It includes language, values, beliefs, customs, rituals, oral and written history, art, music, dance, food, and much more. It is so much a part of who we are and how we live, that most of the time we are not even aware of how it shapes what we see, think, and feel. You can spend a lot of time learning about culture: your own, others', and its influence in general on how we function in our communities and in the world. But you can also take some pretty basic measures to help you be a culturally curious and culturally sensitive mentor. Here's some ideas to help you get started.

Why Does Culture Matter?

As a mentor, you will likely find many ways that your background differs from your mentee's background. At a minimum you will discover generational differences. Perhaps you will also be from different ethnic and religious heritages, or from different socio-economic groups. It might be tempting to want to just look past the differences and focus on what you have in common, but that's not the road to a strong relationship. Rather, the more you can learn about and appreciate your differences *and* similarities, the better.

What You Can Expect:

Generational Differences- One of the best things you can do to help bring the age gap between you and your mentee is to question your assumptions. For example, to help you relate to your mentee you have probably spent some time thinking about what your life was like as a teen. That's great, but keep in mind that life for young people today is very different in ways both positive and negative. One obvious example is technology in the form of things like cell phones, electronic games, and Instant Messaging. These resources are widely available, though in some families it's not affordable, further widening the gap between "haves" and "have nots."

Furthermore, in some cases technology may be helpful and useful, and in other cases, such as violent video games, it can be harmful. To better understand your mentee's "world" check out pop culture. Ask your mentee to introduce you to the latest music, movies, activities, and places. The handout, *What's Hot, What's Not?* (#10) can help you get this conversation started with your mentee.

Family System Differences- between mentors and mentees are another influence. Perhaps, for example:

- You own your home while your mentee's family rents one and shares it with many extended family members. Or your mentee lives in a foster home or with a friends' family.
- You own or lease a car while your mentee uses public transportation or gets rides from friends or family.
- You have a home computer and use email a lot while your mentee doesn't have a computer and also has to share a room with siblings so doesn't have privacy for phone calls, much less homework.
- You have lived in the same home for several years while in the same period your mentee has moved four times.

Socioeconomic Differences-

Poverty, in particular, is a cultural factor that can stress a mentoring relationship in unique ways.

For example, a mentee whose family has lived for generations in poverty might spend \$100 on designer clothing in order to enjoy the moment. A mentor might think it would be better to save for “the future.” That future, however, may seem very uncertain and unpredictable to the young person. And perhaps holding on to the money might mean risking having it stolen, and putting it in a bank isn’t an option because a) there’s no reliable way to get there, and b) institutions like banks aren’t trustworthy. But all of this will vary, of course, from person to person. If you take the time to understand your mentee’s personal views, you might be able to sensitively start to create together a new, positive perspective. Also ask your match support staff for information or training, regarding socioeconomic gaps or differences.

Try It

Many mentor matches find that they appreciate talking about cultural differences and similarities. Start with simple discussions about things like communication styles, slang, and body language. Then share something else like a favorite “traditional” food, type of music, or event. Next, learn together about an aspect of a culture that’s different from either of yours.

Slowly but surely you’ll build a strong relationship based on mutual understanding and respect!

Makes You Think

Nearly 20% of families in the United States speak a language other than English in their own homes.¹

What Can You Do?

You can start with a few simple, but not necessarily easy, steps:

- ◆ Honestly examine your own mind for prejudices and stereotypes. Recognize that almost all of us have learned some and that acknowledging them is the first step to broadening our perspectives.
- ◆ Think about where biases come from and try to see them as learned misinformation.
- ◆ Make a personal commitment to be a culturally sensitive mentor.
- ◆ See your mentee first and foremost as a unique and valuable person.
- ◆ Approach cultural differences as opportunities for learning.
- ◆ Expose yourself to pop culture.
- ◆ Do a little Internet research on generational differences, not so you can stereotype or make assumptions, but so you can see how the times we live in help shape the people we become.

¹ <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/27000.html>