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Reflections on the Power of Mentorship

Jonathan Lee, Lisa N. Lindsay,
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The theme of the USNA Leadership Conference this year was “Invest in Your People: The Power of Mentorship.” It was demonstrated early on in the conference sessions that there is seldom any facet of leadership more important than mentorship. Traditionally, leaders in any setting represent the face of the organization and pull the team from the front. However, the mentors and US Navy representatives at the conference argued that true leadership is viewing the organization holistically and motivating and encouraging members from the ground up. Teaching participants how to roll down their sleeves, take a step back, and prepare their organizations for growth, USNA leaders stated that strength is found in the collective behavior of the organization and not in the unilateral actions and decisions of the leader. Three powerful topics explored throughout the conference were communication, transparency, and values.

Communication

Leadership requires communication skills, and mentorship puts leaders in a position to use those skills to improve their team. Retired Rear Admiral Margaret Klein, who served as the 82nd Commandant of Midshipmen at the US Naval Academy, emphasized listening on both sides of the mentor-mentee relationship. Making people feel part of the team in an authentic way by sharing experiences can help create a culture of mentorship within an organization, rather than using formal mentorship to force superficial connections. Peter Levesque, president of Ports America, advised asking questions and listening to experienced members of your team while in the early stages of taking on a new leadership role. Open and honest communication on both sides of the mentor-mentee relationship benefits the entire team.

Transparency

Rooted within communication is the importance of remaining transparent within the relationship. For the mentor, transparency means pointing

out the flaws in the mentee and challenging them to new boundaries; for the mentee, this means having the courage to challenge the mentor's viewpoints and perspectives. Many mentorship relationships have failed because one party feels uncomfortable pushing against the other or simply calling the other out for problematic behavior. However, a constructive conflict can incite positive change, and positive change can incite progress. Therefore, a true beneficial mentorship should encourage both the mentor and the mentee to think creatively outside of the box and break the boundaries of comfort, ability, and power dynamics.

Values

The core principle of inspiring and motivating mentees is the mentor's ability to recognize and implement their life principles into their work. Building a foundation of values is key to mentorship: the mentor gives advice that they would enact on, they are confident in, and drives the mentees toward their goal. General James Mattis stated, "We are masters of character. We choose what we will stand for in this life." This simple quote is a reminder for the mentor to set a standard of active engagement with their mentees. Values-based mentorship brings generations together because it solidifies commitment in the mentor-mentee relationship. The connection can identify gaps and join them with bridges. This allows action where just means are employed to achieve a positive end result.

At this conference, we were all nourished, motivated, and inspired by the stories we heard and have become renewed by connecting with incredibly different-minded people. We learned that leadership is the authentic work of honestly facing and reconciling deeper facets of ourselves. We were able to gain a new sense of leadership that involves investing in our peers and developing a broader understanding of our team.