Mentor's Energizer

Inside This Issue

The Bahá'í Academy wishes to thank our mentor of the month, Mrs. Asha Sharma, Principal, Indian Learners Own Academy, Kuwait, for sharing her insights.

Contributors to Social Progress

For growing populations of youth across the planet to become constructive participants in the life of society and contributors to social progress, a fundamental shift in thinking is required about the role of moral capabilities in society. This was one of the main points made at the 5th World Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions held in Kazakhstan on 10-11 June. With 80 delegates representing 10 religions and over 40 countries, the striking diversity of faiths made it abundantly clear that cooperation among them is necessary if humanity is to build a more peaceful world. Communities are places where moral capabilities are translated into social reality. Within them, a process of capacity building that enables young and old alike to participate in the transformation of society, a process that protects and nurtures all participants, can be set in motion. According to representative Josh Lincoln, Secretary General of the Bahá'í International Community, "Young people see the contradictions in this world. They have an acute sense of justice, a yearning for meaning and purpose, a desire to serve and contribute meaningfully, a thirst for knowledge and an innate attraction to what is good and beautiful. These characteristics are intrinsic, though they may remain latent and dormant in whole populations when the education and moral empowerment of youth is neglected."

The Universal Human Values courses which mentors are facilitating with thousands of students at all levels of their undergraduate and graduate studies fill this very important gap. They are a wake-up call for the dormancy, which might occur if the latent capacities in all of us aren't stimulated. They allow participants to fully develop their sense of justice, and plan lives of purpose that include service and contribution. Each month, we take a deep breath, and feel the gratitude for being able to contribute, in any small way, to this amazing endeavor.

Meet The Mentors

What is the difference between mentoring and instructing?
There is a world of difference between mentoring and instructing. Instructing implies authority. Mentoring is a friendlier term. Mentoring can be peer-to-peer, like students do for the classmates, teachers do for the new colleagues…. A mentor assumes that the mentee already knows the job. He/she can gauge what the mentee needs to know and offer ideas for improvement. At the same time, the mentor learns also.

What are the Dos and Don'ts of mentoring?
A mentor is not expected to change the existing system or interfere with the system as such. Confidentiality must be kept and findings should not be made public. One should not boast about one's systems. There can be many roads leading to the same destination. Whatever is already running can be made better with additional ideas and guidance. An authentic report has to be given…. The whole process has to be humane and a mentor should be aware of human psychology.

What were the challenges you faced when you were mentoring and how did you overcome them?
It was a very big challenge. Each principal is an authority. (For example) when CBSE declares a particular person a mentor for others…, the other principals start speculating and feel offended. They look into the pluses and minuses of the person; there is always a big question attached, "Why has so and so has been appointed a mentor for me?" This idea has not been welcomed by those principals who are not open-minded and do not believe that we can even learn from our students. This kind of inhibition is the biggest challenge but a mature mentor can always overcome it by remaining in low profile and by declaring that one has come to learn more than to instruct. Some of the principals did not like to share the documents and records to prevent me from somehow stealing their thunder. So one should not be insistent. We also take subject experts to observe the lessons of the teachers. One is not expected to take a battalion of subject experts because it looks very threatening.

How did overcoming the challenges improve your mentorship skills?
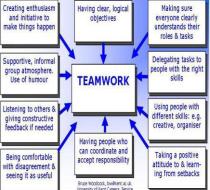I overcame these challenges through practicing modesty. I have appreciated every small move. I openly declared what I learnt and that I would like to add to my experience. This mellowed the person I was working with. I took my school documents to show them the samples and we sat and just shared our systems. Now they do not feel threatened.

Which skills and attitudes did you deploy to be a better mentor?
I feel that I should continue to be very humble for this job and should share equally with them …. In the process I have become very conscious of the wholesome system followed at my school because one should correct oneself before pointing a finger at others or offering guidance.

Successful Teams Foster Contribution

Back issues of the Mentor Energizer and the full Energizer Compilation are available on the website. If you've missed an issue, please feel free to download it at www.bahaiacademy.org

The success of any project requires the contributions of each member of the team, but some teams work better together than others. When all team members feel valued and that their contribution matters, they feel motivated to give it their best.

Encourage ownership

Team members offer more ideas and work harder for any goal/project if they feel a sense of ownership and care about its success or failure. If they don't care on a personal level, they tend to offer only the minimum of effort. Open communication between team members is the key here as well as clear expectations from the mentor. When problems develop along the way, call on the whole team to solve the difficulty. Allow freedom of choice for different solutions. As mentors, we know that we are not in control of student projects. Students display their talents and ideas and elevate their own projects to the level of success.

Give everyone a chance to speak

Some team members are naturally assertive and self-confident, while others are shy and quiet. Assertive, confident people don't necessarily have better ideas, but they are more likely to be heard. To get more out of quiet team members, structure different ways to contribute such as passing ideas around in writing so that everyone can make comments or using a "talking chips" which allows only the bearer to speak and the others to listen.

Make everyone a leader

Each person on the team should have an equally responsible task, the combination of which completes the project in a timely and functional manner. Allowing opportunities for each member to lead the others in their area of expertise develops strengths and talents. Give each person authority over their aspect of the project, bypassing the need for leaders and followers and setting the structure up as collaborative rather than hierarchical.

Be a good example

Model the behaviors you expect from the students. Enthusiastically contribute, keep a positive attitude and high motivation. Listen to the ideas and suggestions of the students and make it clear that you're always available to help work through problems. Use praise more than criticism and leave room for relaxation and fun.

How can we foster both internal and external goals?

We achieve our purpose through clear vision, measureable goals and manageable deeds. All these should be done in a spirit of humble service. Living each day with our purpose in the center takes time and effort. Achieving goals along the way keeps us inspired to continue. All goals are not created equal, however. They may be short or long, individual or require a team, clear and direct or generalized and spread out over time. To avoid having an infinite "to do" list, consider the following goal types before prioritizing and planning. (More on planning next month.)

Chores (external)—Some things we think are goals are really chores or errands in disguise. Doing the dishes, going to the bank, anything that appears on the list daily. They take up a lot of time and may not seem to have much purpose, but they're important for the physical well-being and, if done with the right attitude, they're both useful and aid in personal growth.

Character Building and Behavior Transformation (Internal)—These are personal goals that help us develop moral capabilities, attributes and virtues. They are inherent in any other goal, as everything we do should help us develop our virtues. When we concentrate on improving our communication and consultation skills, speaking the truth, following through on our agreements, sacrificing for others, elevating conversations, promoting harmony and unity at school or at work we are building character. Meditation before any task on the attitudes required and reflection afterward help us focus on these capabilities.

New and Improved Skills (External)—Skill goals pertain to any aspect of life and usually include some sort of practice or training over time. Simple or complicated, they just take time to accomplish. It's much easier to achieve goals that are directly related to our future visions. Any skill goal needs to have purpose, because just doing something for no apparent reason is useless. Skill goals should reflect what is really important for current or future service activities.

Achieving Outcomes or Dreams (Internal and External)—Outcomes and dreams tend to reflect our vision of success and are on the "most important" list. Typical goal setting programs might ask you questions such as "What is your definition of success?" or "What makes you happy?" or "What would your life look like if it were perfect?" Consider asking, "How can you achieve your highest purpose by using your unique talents and capacities to serve humanity?"

Goals that are dreams or focused on achieving outcomes are usually visionary and require consistent effort over time. The interim may be hard to measure, but the end result is clear. These goals usually require all the facets of our lives to be in alignment as they are the focus of our energies. All arrows have to be aimed at the same target.

Next month: How can we help students learn to make cohesive plans?