

Be a “Ray Bell” Mentor

by Chip R. Bell

“He was the best teacher I ever had.” That was a line I heard a lot growing up. The subject was my father; the fan club was populated by his former high school students. By the time I reached adulthood, I too had joined the “Ray Bell’s a Great Teacher” fan club!

Ray Bell was never my teacher in the formal sense of the word. By the time I arrived on the scene, he had left the teaching profession to become a full time banker and full time farmer. But, the mentor and teacher in him never got turned off. Consequently, I was the lucky student of his tutelage! His influence changed my life. His wisdom provided valuable touchstones for my life work as a change agent and facilitator. Below are the precepts of what I call the “Ray Bell Approach to Mentoring.”

Great Mentors Are Judgment-Free

Daddy could be a stern task master and a tough disciplinarian. He was very much a perfectionist when it came to performance. He expected the best, demanded the best and demonstrated the best. However, when the goal was learning, he shifted to a completely different style. His task master side could suddenly become patient, even tolerant...and above all, non-judgmental. When the objective was growth, my most inane question was treated as a query reflecting insight just waiting to happen.

He never snickered at my unknowingness nor scorned my naiveté. As a young man, I heard a lot more expressions of “Good try” than consternations of “Good gracious!” Bottom line, if I was busy working to acquire a new skill or knowledge, leeway and latitude seemed to be his specialty. Great mentors are quick to confirm and slow to correct. Great mentors use body language which speaks acceptance and affirmation. They suspend critique knowing judgment impedes risk taking and experimentation, both tantamount to effective learning.

Great Mentors Are Participative Partners

“How ‘bout going and getting the tractor and park it in the barn?” Those sweet words were music to my ears when I was a ten-year old growing up on a farm. It was daddy’s way of nudging along my maturity. To get the very special privilege of starting, driving and parking a large expensive tractor communicated trust and respect. His gesture also left me feeling thrilled...and tall.

The tractor-parking incident was more than a badge of being “grown up.” It was a symbol of partnership—I obviously relied on daddy, but at that moment, he trusted me enough to return that dependence. Great mentors perpetually seek ways to include...to partner. They would rather facilitate than lecture; they enjoy great

questions more than smart answers. Daddy joined in the pursuit, offering guidance not expertness. He seemed to always know that participation was the route to discovery and insight, all important building blocks for significant learning.

Great Mentors Show Perpetual Curiosity

Daddy asked me questions to which he did not know the answer. That always stood in stark contrast with the experiences I witnessed in many of my friend's parents. My buddies seemed to frequently get questions asked with the slam of a spring loaded bear trap. "Do you have any idea what time it is?" was not really an "I lost my watch" kind of question? But, Daddy never used questions that way. When he asked a question it always meant he was in search of an answer. I came to realize it was evidence of his perpetual curiosity.

On family driving trips, we stopped at every historical road sign. We had long Sunday afternoon discussions provoked by queries like, "What do you reckon Charles Dickens meant by that?" or "I wonder what Julius Caesar might have been feeling when that happened?" He took things apart just to see how they were made. He watched squirrels build a nest and then launched into a question-filled discussion of nest-building genes or weather sensing skills. Great mentors never stop being curious...they view themselves as learners more than teachers. And, they are both passionate and unabashed in their exhibition of non-stop inquisitiveness.

Great Mentors Find Humor in Most Things

Daddy was no comedian! In fact, he was a very shy man. But, he enjoyed a great tease and was as quick to laugh *at* himself as he was to laugh *with* others. His humor was innocent and authentic, never contrived or sarcastic. Most importantly, he saw lightness in simple occurrences and enchantment in ordinary events. When he laughed, his expressions were bounteous and unbridled; his declarations of joy were likewise contagious.

He intuitively knew that merriment was a key piece in the puzzle of learning. When learners encounter humor and joy in their mentors, they learn to laugh at themselves. The serious pursuit of growth must be coupled with an unserious process of growth. Ray Bell demonstrated that no matter how grave the destination, the trip needed to be a pleasurable one. He was the only teacher I ever had who could find a whimsical side to trigonometry or Charles Dickens! The byproduct of his example was my gaining an ineradicable fondness for learning. That path has enabled me to become more and more a self-directed learner...learning simply for the joy of the trip.

Great Mentors Show Obvious Pride

Ray Bell experienced life first hand. But, he also experienced life second hand. When my hard earned competence was displayed in some public presentation, it was

as if he too was on the stage, down the court, or across the field. He was noticeably proud of the accomplishments of his children. And, it never had a possessiveness “That’s MY boy” credit seeking dimension. He just seemed to be thrilled to see how it all worked out.

Great mentors bubble over with pride when witnessing the effects of their mentor-protégé relationships. They not only vicariously experience the growth of their learners; they look for ways to bear witness to the power of learning. I often felt Daddy’s pride was part “Isn’t that great!” and part “Isn’t that amazing!” Not that he was surprised I could actually do what he taught; I think he was just awed by the whole process of learning!

Great Mentors Have Impeccable Ethics

The most important lesson I learned from him was this: teaching is an ethical act! Effective mentors, trainers and change agents must be clean in their learner-dealings, not false, manipulative, or greedy. Competent mentors must be honest and congruent in their communications and actions. They must not steal their learners’ opportunities for struggle or moments of glory. Great mentors refrain from coveting their learners’ talents or falsifying their own. They must honor the learner just as they honor the process of mutual learning.

Finally, Ray Bell was all about love. And, it infused his mentoring relationship. When former students of his spoke of their fond memories, it was clear they were speaking of someone they loved...and, of one who loved in return. Dr. Malcolm Knowles taught me that a really good teacher, mentor or trainer must first and foremost love the learning. Ray Bell taught an even greater lesson: a great teacher, mentor or trainer must first and last love the learner!

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