



June 2007

Masterful Mentoring

TIP

Tip of the Month

Make room in your busy schedule to adequately prepare for productive conversations and expect great things to happen as a result.

PREPARING FOR PRODUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS

As discussed in last month's issue, productive conversations can make or break a mentoring relationship. What you do, think, and expect before you engage your mentoring partner in dialogue will have a large impact on what happens during your conversations. In this article, we will explore the attitudes and actions that will help you prepare for productive mentoring conversations so that you can make the most of your time together.

Mentoring Attitude Model

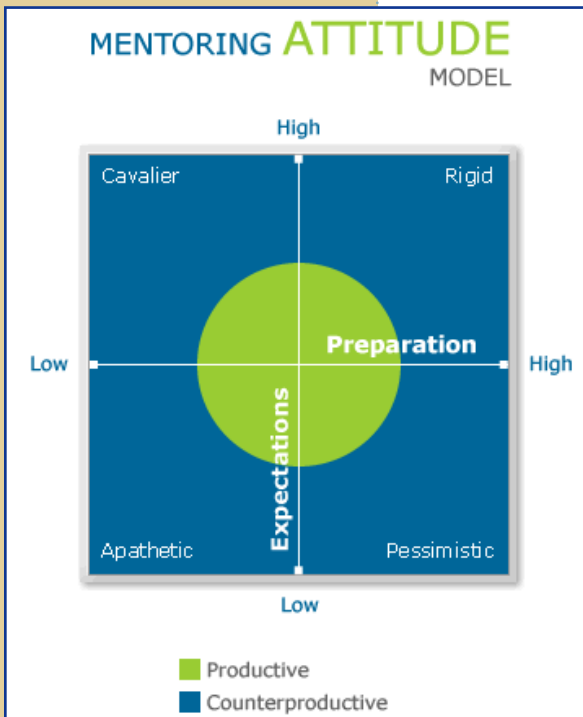
Triple Creek developed the Mentoring Attitude model to help individuals understand the mindset and energy that they bring to their mentoring conversations. These attitudes can help or hinder the effectiveness of mentoring engagements. When looking at the thoughts and actions that take place before conversations happen, two critical dimensions stand out: the time and energy invested in preparation, and the amount and type of outcomes that are expected from the conversation. These two dimensions define the axes of the model: preparation and expectations.

Preparation

The horizontal axis is used to represent preparation. Preparation pertains to the amount of conscious or unconscious effort you spend in readying yourself for future conversations. This effort can take the form of time in thought and/or planning. Preparation also reflects the amount of structure that you bring to the conversation. Structure can show up in the form of an agenda, checklist, support material, and/or procedural guidelines for the conversation (formal or informal). It is represented by a continuum that goes from low to high. As will be explained in detail later, moderate preparation behavior is seen as desirable, while both low and high preparation behaviors are viewed as counterproductive.

Expectations

The vertical axis is used to represent expectations. Expectations are things you believe you will get out of your conversation. Everyone has expectations, regardless of how consciously they are aware of them. Expectations can be in relation to tangible items like work product, plans, or firm commitments for action, as well as intangible items like

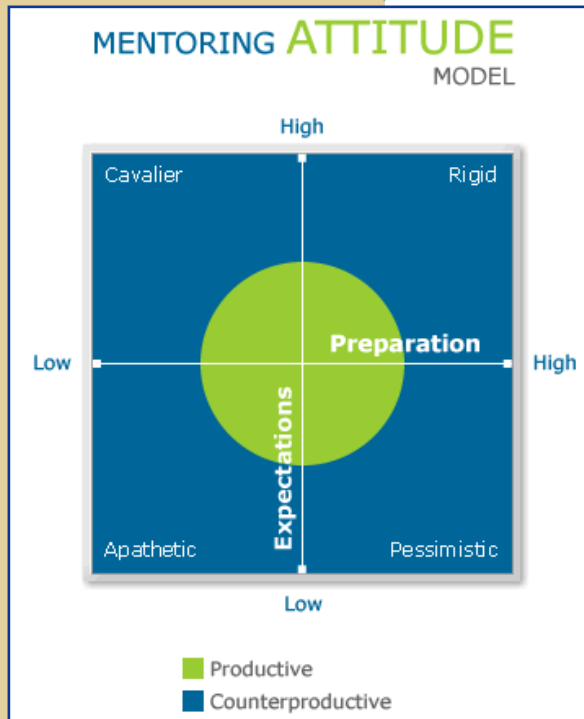


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PREPARING FOR PRODUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS (cont.)

relational bonding, feelings of support or encouragement, new insights, or mental/emotional stimulation. In general, expectations lead to positive or negative feelings about engaging the conversation itself. The expectations axis reflects the amount and quality of expected outcomes that you bring to the conversation. It is quite possible that you may not expect a great number of outcomes from the conversation, but you do expect those outcomes to meet a very high quality mark (and vice versa). Expectations are represented by a continuum that goes from low to high. As will be explained in detail later, moderate expectations are seen as desirable, while both low and high expectations are viewed as counterproductive.



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Counterproductive Attitudes

When placed together, the axes create four distinct attitudes or mindsets that can have a profound influence on the productivity of mentoring conversations. These four prevailing attitudes are formed by the degree of preparation and expectations that is brought to the conversation. While it is possible that every time you have a mentoring conversation you may have a different attitude, usually you will have a tendency or preference toward one of the four attitudes. Since moderate degrees of preparation and expectations are deemed productive, we will focus on the counterproductive aspects that occur when preparation and/or expectations are too high and/or too low. The four counterproductive attitudes show up as rigid, pessimistic, apathetic, and cavalier.

Rigid

When a high level of expectations is combined with a high level of preparation, this forms a mindset that appears rigid during conversations. The rigid person is usually set firmly on accomplishing their objectives and will continue to drive the conversation toward their pre-determined ends. Although this type of mindset may be right for some types of relationships, it can derail or subvert the intention of most mentoring relationships. Mentoring conversations are meant to be generative and mutual by nature. Rigid conversations will work against these important mentoring dynamics resulting in discussions that can only go as far as the rigid person can imagine or plan for, as well as leaving the other mentoring partner feeling used or manipulated.

Pessimistic

When a high level of preparation is combined with a low level of expectations, this forms a mindset that appears pessimistic during conversations. The pessimistic person is usually negative and gloomy and will look for evidence during the conversation to support their mindset. They show little or no positive energy or enthusiasm about the results that can be accomplished through the mentoring relationship. This obviously leaves very little room for envisioning and enlightening, which are two major benefits that are possible through productive conversations. A pessimistic mindset can wear down the other mentoring partner and cause them to lose hope that anything positive will result from the mentoring relationship.



☑ PREPARING FOR PRODUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS (cont.)

Apathetic

When a low level of expectations is combined with a low level of preparation, this forms a mindset that appears apathetic during conversations. The apathetic person is usually convinced that there is little to be gained from their conversation. They often appear indifferent or unconcerned, showing little emotion or passion during conversations. Apathetic people come off as aloof or emotionally distant. By putting very little into and expecting very little out of the conversation, they set up a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby very little can be accomplished. This behavior can be very frustrating for the other mentoring partner who may begin to think that they are wasting their time and give up trying to make a meaningful connection or contribution.

Cavalier

When a low level of preparation is combined with a high level of expectations, this forms a mindset that appears cavalier during conversations. The cavalier person is usually supremely confident in their own ability to make exciting things happen regardless of the circumstances. They will talk a great deal about actions they want to happen or results they anticipate, but spend very little time or effort considering the details or ramifications of said actions. During conversations they can come off as arrogant, inconsiderate, and careless. This will obviously work against the collaborative intent of mentoring relationships. The other mentoring partner can quickly begin to feel superfluous and domineered by this type of cavalier behavior.

Moderation Matters

A moderate level of preparation and expectations sets the stage for more productive conversations. Moderation for most of us is an issue of discipline since our natural tendencies will pull us into counterproductive attitudes. If you have tendencies toward one of the counterproductive attitudes, you may want to consider how you can modify your behavior to enable your conversations to be more productive. Conceptually, it is as simple as making yourself aware of your counterproductive habits and taking corrective action. The following suggestions can give you a place to start.

- *Low Preparation Tendencies* – You will need to carve out some time in your schedule prior to your conversations to mentally rehearse or contemplate key topics that will be productive for your mentoring relationship. Consider your major concerns, emerging trends, changes in condition, aspirations, frustrations, breakthroughs, and progress. You can also create an agenda or do some research to support an important discussion topic. The amount of time and energy that you invest in preparation should be in proportion to what you hope to accomplish, but you must hope to accomplish something from your conversation. For example, if you have a big decision that you want quality input on, you will need to prepare enough to be able to concisely present the issue.



RESOURCES

Triple Creek offers many free resources on our web site, including booklets, research papers, and an archive of past newsletters.

Visit www.3creek.com for access to these additional mentoring resources.

PREPARING FOR PRODUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS (cont.)

- *High Preparation Tendencies* – Mentoring conversations work best when there is a good amount of spontaneity and freedom to range during the discussion. Overstructuring or trying to accomplish too many objectives can stifle and limit the generative aspect of the conversation. It is helpful to have one or two major issues that you spend your preparation time and energy on. We recommend that you define three levels of satisfaction for each objective:
 - o Minimal - the lowest result that you will accept.
 - o Modest - a good, solid result.
 - o Maximum - the result will exceed your expectations.

If your conversation is timebound and you finish early, you can either celebrate and end early, or spend the remainder of your time discussing potential issues to tackle during your next conversation.

- *Low Expectations Tendencies* – Mentoring relationships deliver high value to both the mentee and the mentor. Every conversation that you have with your mentoring partner provides an opportunity to learn, share, be affirmed, and/or be challenged. Ask yourself: *What will add value to me and help me feel a greater sense of accomplishment and fulfillment?* Do you need to be heard, validated, more productive, more aware, or encouraged? Set your aspirations and structure your conversations to get what you want from your mentoring relationship. Don't allow the opportunity that mentoring affords you to slip by while waiting for something to happen. Make it happen by being intentional and speaking directly about your wants and needs.
- *High Expectations Tendencies* – The reality is that most of the results that come from a mentoring relationship happen over a modest period of time (months). Having expectations that a single conversation will bring startling or breakthrough results is not the norm. To set a modest amount of expectations, you can make a list of your expectations and define a realistic timeline for accomplishing each item. Prioritize your list and focus on one or two items at a time. To modify high quality expectations, you can look at your goals as a process rather than a destination. This can help you appreciate the strides that lead to progress and the incremental gains you are experiencing.

To ensure that you are ready for mentoring conversations, also consider your frame of mind or emotional state. Your mood can be a great predictor of how well prepared you are for a productive conversation. Do you feel comfortable and confident (positive indicators) or do you feel anxious, worried, afraid, hurried, timid, or sad (negative indicators)? If you find yourself in a negative frame of mind, look to the Mentoring Attitude model to determine what kind of adjustments you can make to feel more positive. The payoff from a productive mentoring conversation is well worth the effort.



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PREPARING FOR PRODUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS (cont.)

Practice Exercise

The following exercise can help you and your partner determine the effectiveness of your preparation for conversations with one another.

1. Assess how effective your preparations for conversations have been related to the following issues.
 - Discuss the amount and quality of expectations you have for your mentoring conversations (low, moderate, high).
 - Discuss the amount of time/energy and structure that you bring to your mentoring conversations (low, moderate, high).
 - Discuss the counterproductive attitude that you are most inclined toward (rigid, pessimistic, apathetic, and/or cavalier).
2. Discuss how satisfied you are with the prevailing attitude (mindset, energy) that inhabits your mentoring conversations.
 - If you are fully satisfied in the prevailing attitude in your mentoring conversations, discuss how you will ensure that you maintain that commitment.
 - If you are not satisfied or feel there is room for improvement in the prevailing attitude in your mentoring conversations, discuss areas for development.