

## THE GRAVITY OF MENTORSHIP

by Dan White

**Tell Me And I Forget, Teach Me And I May Remember, Involve Me And I Learn.  
—Benjamin Franklin**

This may start off like a story your parents told you as a child, but it really happened this way. My first day of work in this industry started on a Monday, Jan. 22, to be exact. I had loaded all of my necessities into the back of my car the previous day, left the love of my life standing in a driveway (we got married a year later) and headed south from St. Louis to Memphis through a snow-storm to start working for a company I knew little about that specialized in an industry I knew nothing about.

Although I knew nothing about what I was going to be doing, I did know I was going to make it work. So, I headed in early, anticipating the excitement of filling out human resource forms, finding out where the locker filled with pens and note pads was, and hopefully locating a bathroom along the way. As expected, a woman named Nancy greeted me out front and said, “Follow me, we have some paperwork to fill out.” I smiled. No sooner than I had sat down, a man with a boisterous voice, suspenders and a Ventair hat came into the room and said, “Grab your things, we have work to do. Nancy, he can fill this stuff out tonight when he gets home.”

Until that point, I only knew this man as Alex, that I would be working closely with him and that the three people who had been given this opportunity before me were no longer employed there. Needless to say, I was apprehensive.

My first day with Alex consisted of, what I learned later, was a keying meeting, project walk through and multiple contractor visits. By the end of the day, I was beyond confused and tired but remember thinking I can learn so much from this man. Throughout that first day with Alex, without saying it, he made it very clear to me that he was willing to help me succeed any way he could, as long as I followed one simple rule:

Don't ask the same question twice

So that night, after I filled out my HR paperwork, I purchased a package of composition notebooks—you know the type with the black and white speckled cover—and made a few simple decisions:

- I would ask Alex a lot of questions.
- I would write down his responses.
- I would try my very best to respect his simple rule.

I soon realized that Alex was, in most situations, impatient. He would express his frustrations with loud outbursts. I grew to love hearing the responses he gave contractors who wanted to change the hand of a frame or modify the lever design of a mortise lock after they had already been purchased. But when he worked with me he was composed, and, inadvertently taught me what authentic humility and grace looked like.

When in the midst of the many tasks and responsibilities those of us who

have worked in distribution find ourselves in, it was very common for me—greener than a four leaf clover—to run across something I was not familiar with or need a second opinion from a seasoned veteran. I would first pull out my composition notebook and scour through all the previous questions and answers to ensure it was not something I had asked Alex before. If not, I would gather the needed documents, my composition notebook, swallow any pride that was floating around my throat and head down to his office.

Mentors are, and Alex was:

1. Committed to the responsibility of mentoring. A mentor is an advisor and coach who provides guidance, gives feedback and freely shares their experience and expertise. It takes trust, respect and a deep understanding of the personal development needs of the mentee to take on this critical responsibility.

Example: There was never a time that Alex said he was too busy; never a response given that gave me an indication that he was not interested in sharing, engaging and guiding me. He did not look for quick responses; he gave suggestions, shared experiences and then had me do the work—most of the time with him by my side cheering me on.

2. Always recognizing opportunities to mentor. A mentor does not always wait for the mentee to ask a ques-

tion. They serve as an advocate for the mentee whenever the opportunity presents itself and are always seeking opportunities for increased visibility and deeper understanding. In many cases, playing devil's advocate to help the mentee think through important decisions, strategies or application.

Example: If Alex saw something on a project he was working on individually that could be used as a learning tool, he would do something very difficult. He would stop, call down to me and say "Son, grab your notebook and come down here. I have something you have got to see." Some of the most challenging projects I worked on were the ones Alex pulled me into. He did not give me the answers; rather, he empowered me to think, and challenged me to understand and not be intimidated at the chance of failure.

3. Regularly challenging you to be more. A mentor pushes you to hone and learn new skills while igniting a passion for your craft. They are willing to take you under their wing for the sole purpose of helping you stay motivated and discover your own identity and path. Mentors look for ways to make you successful; many times with the hope that you surpass their greatest accomplishments.

Example: Alex never spoke to me as if I was inferior. His expectation was clear—work hard, but more importantly work smart. Enjoy what you do, share your passion with others and ask a lot of questions—just not the same one twice.

No matter what position, role or title you hold, mentors are there. Seek out those special individuals who are willing to share and invest in your growth. Thank you to all the mentors in our industry that take the time to uphold the integrity of our profession, share the passion for our work and take the time to put someone else's success before your own. During the four years I spent with Alex before his passing, I did not realize how much of an impact he had, not only on my career but my life as a whole. Our relationship was more than a close working relationship that later evolved into a rock solid friendship built on trust and respect for each other. I am grateful to have had Alex Graham as my mentor, guiding me.

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