

NAVIGATING YOUR CAREER

Learning Partner Toolkit



Produced by:



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INTRODUCTION

Mentoring is an important element of a sound career development plan for all employees.

- If you are early in your career, a mentor can help focus your vision for future opportunities while providing sound advice and guidance for maximizing your impact in your current role.
- At midcareer, a mentor can help in assessing your skills acquired through varied experiences and create a meaningful plan for your next steps in the organization.
- Late in your career, a mentor can help you review your accomplishments and assess and plan the legacy you wish to leave behind.

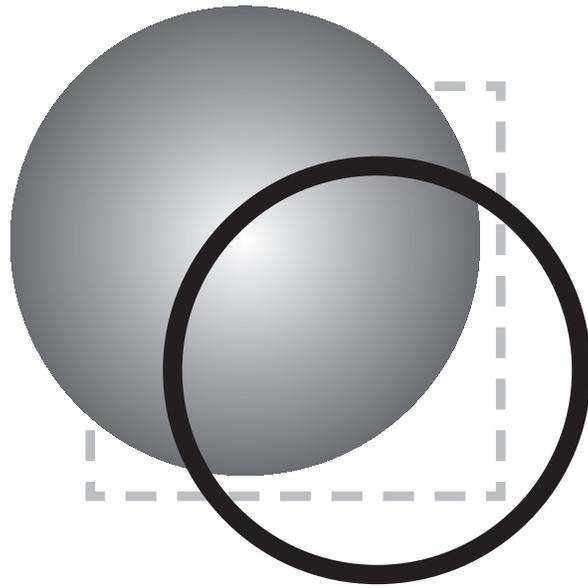
Although “formal” mentoring programs are common in many organizations, most employees find that their opportunities for mentoring occur through a more “informal” process of selecting and engaging in a mentoring relationship outside of a formal organizational program.

This series has been designed to provide all employees, regardless of their participation in a formal program, with a framework for establishing and getting the most out of their mentoring relationships. Each module provides you with suggestions for organizing your plan for mentoring and suggestions for conversations to have with your mentor, as well as practical steps to take to develop your skill set.

Other modules in this series include:

- **Building Working Relationships**
- **Increasing Visibility**
- **Influencing Others Through Leadership**
- **Sharing Organizational Knowledge**
- **Your Career Journey**

Each module provides a framework for self-paced reflection with prompts and suggestions of areas you may wish to talk over with your mentor. The prompts are designated by this symbol: 



NAVIGATING YOUR CAREER

What to Consider Before You Begin



SELF - ASSESSMENT: LEARNING PARTNERS

Rate yourself:

Part I

How comfortable are you in creating a learning partnership with these qualities?

	Uncomfortable				Very comfortable
1. Learning Environment Maintaining a "safe environment" for learning to happen.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Honesty Voicing my truth and listening intently to the truth of others.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Acceptance Accepting the impossibility of fully understanding the experiences of others and acknowledging they are real.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Empathy Demonstrating that I understand the feelings and emotions of my learning partner.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Enlightenment Engaging in my own personal discovery and reflection.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Trust Building trust with a person who may have a different perspective and letting this person know I am trustworthy.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Attitudes Knowing when biases or assumptions may be preventing me from listening or empathizing.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Judgments Suspending judgments and certainties.	1	2	3	4	5
9. Stories Using stories and examples to make the learning real.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Ego Keeping my ego in check in order to focus on my learning partner.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Pacing Allowing learning to take its course.	1	2	3	4	5
12. Appreciation Letting my learning partner know that I appreciate his or her contributions.	1	2	3	4	5



SELF - ASSESSMENT: LEARNING PARTNERS *(continued)*

Characteristics

Consider each of the following characteristics as important factors to keep in mind as you prepare to meet your learning partner.

CHARACTERISTIC	BEST DESCRIBES YOU
Communication Style	introvert . . . extrovert
Interpersonal Style	task relationship
Organizational Knowledge	high low
Years of Service	0 5 10+
Visibility in Organization	high low
Personal Style	think feel
Work Style	concrete abstract
Learning/ Teaching Style	random logic
Decision- making Style	deliberate . . . cautious
Availability	Informal formal
Other Factors · Gender · Ethnicity · Age	

Part II

How will you learn about the characteristics of your learning partner so that both styles can be accommodated?



YOUR LEARNING PARTNER BUSINESS CARD

Most relationships begin with an exchange of information that provides a basis to begin a conversation. Think about the information you will share with your learning partner by completing the business card below.

Strength you <i>bring</i> to your learning partnership	Strength you want to <i>gain</i> or <i>leverage</i> through your learning partnership
Your name Descriptor of yourself as a learning partner. For example, coach, teacher, wise one	
Fear or concern about learning partnerships	Hopes/dreams for this learning partnership

SAMPLE

8



Complete with your answers and then share with your learning partner.

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____



PERSONAL GOALS FOR THE PROGRAM

Perhaps this is your first time as a learning partner or this may be a repeat performance. Whichever it is, learning partners typically find that each experience is a learning adventure. There is much you can gain from your relationship. Treat this experience as an enlightening adventure and free yourself to be open to seeing new and different perspectives in order to gain broader insight and knowledge.

What are your goals for this learning partnership?

What types of learning partnerships do you want?



PREPARING YOUR LEARNING PARTNER TOOLKIT—MENTOR, ADVISOR, GUIDE, COACH

In addition to exhibiting common characteristics, successful learning partners have a variety of resources as part of their personal “toolkits.” Learning partners who are able to incorporate a range of perspectives in their learning partnership interactions are more effective guides for their learning partners’ career journeys over time.

A learning partner toolkit is a metaphor for the variety of professional experiences learning partners will share and gain through ongoing dialogues with partners. It should contain effective communication “tools” such as:

- career stories
- work examples
- personal examples
- tips and techniques
- resources—names and places
- plenty of questions that trigger deep discussions
- confusions, concerns, disappointments, and moments of pride

Think about the following items to remind yourself what’s in your learning partner toolkit.

MODELS OF PERSONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Have specific examples of effective behavior, including personal examples. Learning partners want to know how they can be more effective in communicating, doing their job, interacting with others, managing their emotions, and balancing their lives. These items might be helpful to add to your toolkit as well:

- Positive “role models” from early in your career.
- A good description of your personal style.
- Examples of individuals who demonstrate personal effectiveness.



PREPARING YOUR LEARNING PARTNER TOOLKIT *(continued)*

EXAMPLES OF SELF-REFLECTION

Consider how you share stories about yourself and provide your learning partner with a balanced perspective of your experience: successes, failures, near misses, lucky breaks, fortunate timing, and leveraged opportunities. Often, this is the most sought-after information by learning partners. You will want a variety of stories in your toolkit:

- Recall memories from early in your career, as well as examples from within the last six months. Encourage your learning partner to share stories as well.
- Talk about people who have made a difference in your life.
- Demonstrate how you have learned from your failures or professional struggles.

EXAMPLES OF A HEALTHY BALANCE

Tight timelines infringe on personal time, life issues create added stress, and work priorities are not the same for everyone. Learning partners want to talk about managing these conflicts so they can continue to be successful at work. Your toolkit should contain examples of how one maintains a sense of wholeness while navigating a career:

- Examples of how you manage your personal and professional priorities.
- Insight into yourself as a whole person, including your family, friends, interests, and what is important to you.



PREPARING YOUR LEARNING PARTNER TOOLKIT *(continued)*

TECHNIQUES FOR PROVIDING TIMELY FEEDBACK

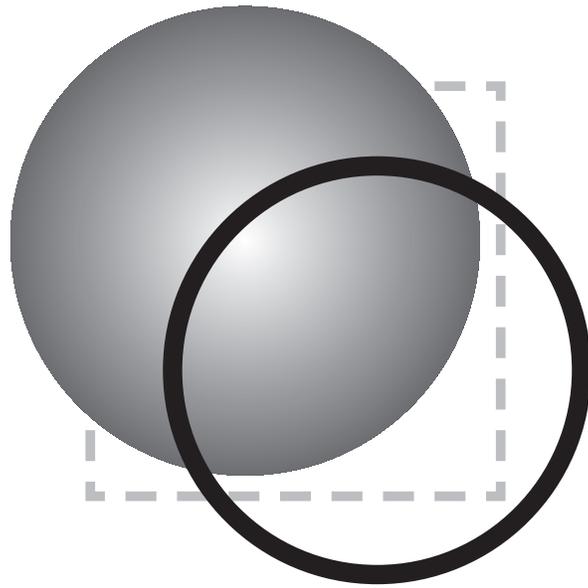
Learning partners want to feel like they can come to each other for feedback about interactions they have had or are planning to have. Consider including these items in your toolkit:

- An understanding of your “personal feedback style” and how you show acceptance and confirmation to another person. Provide examples of using your feedback style effectively.
- Stories and examples of when you questioned if you made a right decision and feedback or affirmation from a colleague or senior employee who helped you.
- An example of a time you received difficult feedback and how you used that feedback to learn and grow.

MODELS OF EFFECTIVE HABITS

Learning partners look to each other as role models for personal effectiveness. Consider how you will answer these questions:

- Are you finding the need to repeatedly reschedule your learning partnership sessions?
- Are you both prepared for your learning partnership sessions, or do you find that you both “chuckle” at your mutual lack of preparation?
- Are these behaviors consistent with workplace habits that are associated with successful individuals?
- Do you tend to skip lunch in order to make time for your learning partnership session? Are you really at your best if you do this?
- Have you and your learning partner discussed the habits you will need to develop to ensure your success? Are you willing to hold each other accountable to those agreed-upon habits?



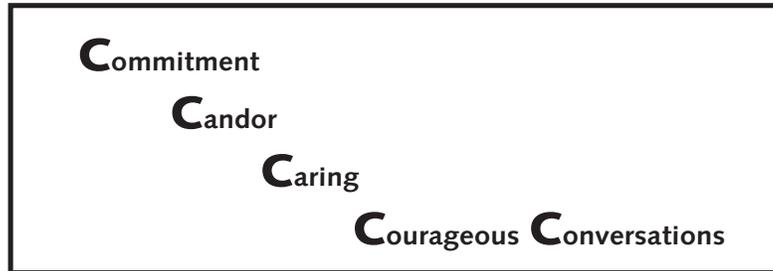
NAVIGATING YOUR CAREER

*Understanding the Roles
in a Learning Partnership*



THE 5C'S MODEL FOR ACTING AS A LEARNING PARTNER

Before you undertake the role of a learning partner, think about the overall factors that go into the relationship. Think about any past learning partnership experiences you have had. Remember that your partner is counting on you to be there for him or her. Here is a model that represents behaviors of a learning partner that contribute to highly successful experiences for both partners.

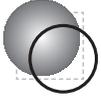


COMMITMENT

- Respect the time set aside for meeting by being timely and prepared.
- Touch base regularly by email or telephone outside of monthly meetings.
- Find a neutral place where outside distractions can be avoided.
- Establish ground rules and follow them.
- Take on the role as a learner willing to take in new information.

CANDOR

- Maintain a “safe” environment for open conversation.
- Maintain confidentiality.
- Be ready for surprises.
- Check out your assumptions, both past and present, and then let go of them.
- Keep your sense of humor. Laugh a lot.



THE 5C'S MODEL FOR ACTING AS A LEARNING PARTNER *(continued)*

CARING

- Maintain a balance between sharing your own perspective and inquiring about your learning partner.
- Remain sensitive to gender, cultural, style, and generational differences.
- Listen deeply to hear both the spoken and unspoken messages.
- Listen to learn.
- Ask caring questions—care about your learning partner both personally and professionally, care about this individual's perspective, and care about learning.

COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS

- Take risks, but when it feels like it may be too risky, explain why.
- Challenge one another when there is confusion or disagreement.
- Let your learning partner into your real thoughts and real experiences.
- Play “what if” by offering hypothetical challenges.
- Be willing to tell your stories.

What benefit have you seen in having courageous conversations with others?

What are barriers to having these conversations?



TIPS FOR PLAYING THE ROLE OF A LEARNING PARTNER

Counselor

- Listen and empathize to provide emotional support.
- Use paraphrasing to encourage reflection and thinking out loud.
- Promote exploration and discovery.
"You've thought about this a lot. Sounds like that experience was confusing because... Which of these options is important to you?"

Advisor

- Question your learning partner's thinking without judgment.
- Allow your learning partner to generate solutions.
- Highlight potential choices. Share personal examples.
"You've tried different things. First you __, then __, and __."
"What would have made it work better?" "Did you ever think about ...?"

Collaborator

- Brainstorm cause-and-effect relationships, ideas, and plans.
- Problem solve while learning together.
"Let's think about how this could be tackled."

Coach

- Focus on actions that will achieve the learning partner's goals.
- Assess existing skills and develop new skills.
- Present issues and concerns.
- Move your learning partner to a higher level.
"This could get in the way of..." "If you tried __, what do you think would happen?" "How are you going to deal with ...?"

Guide

- Help organize and apply experiences and learning.
- Direct your learning partner toward resources.
- Make introductions and highlight opportunities.
"You've thought of many options. Which seems most reasonable to you?" "Have you talked to ...?" "I'll set up a meeting with __ so you can explore that."
- Which role are you most comfortable with?
- Which role will be a challenge for you?



ACTIVITIES OF A LEARNING PARTNER

A learning partnership is a two-way commitment. As learning partners, encourage each other to engage in the relationship.

Encourage your learning partner to:

Reflect in order to better understand themselves.

- Consider their life experiences, which can enhance learning about themselves personally and professionally.
- Think about what they already know.
- Give themselves credit for their skills, talents, and abilities and share them with you.

Challenge to take learning to a deeper level.

- Challenge you as their learning partner when appropriate.
- Challenge their thinking, as well as the thinking of others.
- Break some rules, think outside the box, stretch and grow.

Question to increase understanding.

- Ask questions to clarify and deepen understanding.
- Get comfortable with "wondering out loud."
- Use questions to shift learning to another perspective or dimension.

Practice in order to apply what they have learned.

- Practice and act on any new learning they have gained from the learning partnership.
- Keep you, their learning partner, informed about the results of their activities.
- Treat feedback as a gift that leads to more learning and understanding.

Observe to learn from reactions and responses.

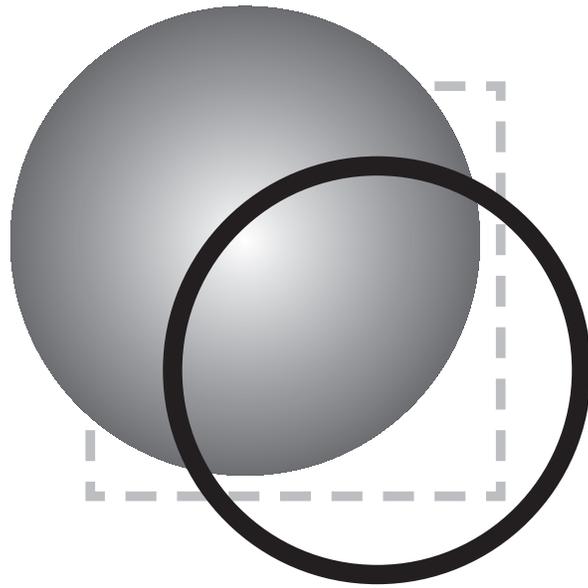
- Become a keen observer of those they interact with.
- Talk about what they have observed and the thinking process behind the actions.

Follow in order to go down new paths with confidence.

- Find role models.
- Pay attention to how they take advice and what they do with it.
- Be critical to determine when to follow and when to lead.

Learn to gain knowledge and understanding.

- Demonstrate and provide examples of any applications of learning from this relationship.
- Be prepared to teach as well as learn.



NAVIGATING YOUR CAREER

*How to Get the Most out
of Your Conversations*



MAINTAINING A LEARNING FOCUS

Note: pages 20–21 are applicable for those who are mentoring others.

Effective learning partnerships come about through a personal relationship that has a focus on learning. A learning partner has an important role in maintaining this focus.

1. FOCUS ON THEM

The focus of the interaction should be on your learning partner, not on you as the expert. Instead of telling your learning partner what to do, learn about his or her experiences. Your comment might be “What was that like for you?” rather than “Here is what I think.”

2. STUDY YOUR LEARNING PARTNER

Try to learn where your learning partner is coming from. Help evaluate the circumstances. Then listen between the lines and get a sense of the individual's personality, drive, and motivation.

3. CREATE A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Learning partnerships put partners in a vulnerable spot. They need to acknowledge what they don't know and take risks to rethink what they thought they knew. Try to provide both personal support and career support. That means being available emotionally, intellectually, and professionally.

4. BALANCE SUPPORT WITH A CHALLENGE

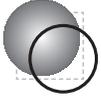
Become a “voice of reason” as you provide realistic challenges to your learning partner's thinking or recollections of experiences. Use rigorous questions and conversations that are appropriate for the individual's readiness and confidence.

5. ASSESS THE TEACHABLE MOMENTS

Learning is enhanced when individuals are ready emotionally and intellectually to receive it.

6. PROVIDE THE “WHY”

Provide a clear explanation for your reasoning, however complicated it may be. Let your learning partner know the background and rationale behind your examples.



MAINTAINING A LEARNING FOCUS

(continued)

7. "I DON'T KNOW" IS OKAY

Be willing to show your vulnerability in ways that do not minimize your credibility. You do not need to know all the answers. Try "I don't know" followed by "Let's think about that for a minute." Let your learning partner know you can still learn something.

8. ASK GOOD QUESTIONS

Learn to ask open-ended, probing questions. Inquire to understand your learning partner's perspective. For example, "If you could have a magic wand, what would you like to see happen?"

9. TEST THEIR JUDGMENT

Help expand your learning partner's thinking by providing challenges that require good judgment and cause them to think independently. Then, offer your "teachable point of view."

10. LEARN TO USE SILENCE

Learn to live with silence in order to listen better and allow for productive thinking. Well-placed pauses by the learning partner contribute to the other's confidence.

11. LEARN WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen and watch for nonverbal cues, circular reasoning, or rambling, which can be indications that what is said may not be what is really going on. Let your learning partner know if you are confused or need more conversation and clarification. Sometimes it is what has *not* been said that is most important.

12. STAY TUNED FOR CROSS-CULTURAL FACTORS

Watch for "sandpaper moments" when your perspective is different from your learning partners. It could be the result of a cultural or gender difference. Become comfortable talking about these moments. Ask about a cultural perspective in a respectful way.



THE MINDSET OF APPRECIATION

Your learning partnership will be stronger when you show each other **Appreciation**.

When Learning Partners Feel Appreciated They:

1. Take a real interest in each other's success.
2. Engage in conversations freely.
3. Share stories and examples easily.
4. Put forth extra energy into the relationship.
5. Provide helpful feedback.
6. Ask and listen attentively.
7. Challenge respectfully.
8. Feel valued and respected.

You can show your learning partner you appreciate him or her by:



BUILDING TRUST

The first step in building trust is to be viewed as trustworthy.

AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY

Trustworthy *adj.* Warranting trust; reliable.

Think of it as a bank account. Building trust is really about daily deposits in people's trust account with you. Deposits add up with the knowledge that on occasion you may make withdrawals. The key is to have ample deposits to avoid any bankrupt trust accounts with people whom you need to work with in order to succeed.



Complete these lists with your learning partner. Ask him or her for examples of deposits and withdrawals.

Trust Account—Daily Deposits

Deposits	Withdrawals
• Keeps promises	• Forgets, ignores, or breaks promises
• Listens to understand	• Listens to judge
• Admits mistakes	• Blames others
• Does good work	• Has average performance
• Has integrity	• Lacks principle
• Is consistent	• Is unreliable
• Serves others	• Is self-serving
•	•
•	•
•	•
•	•
•	•



TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

Your learning partnership requires conversations that are **dialogues** and provide two-way learning.

This happens when you as a learning partner:

- Create a “safe container” for open and honest conversations.
- Exchange personal experiences that are accepted as “real” by both of you.
- Voice your personal truths and listen to your learning partner’s.
- Accept the impossibility of fully understanding each other’s experience.
- Listen to learn, rather than “fix” or change another.
- Stay tuned to biases or assumptions in order to listen and empathize.
- Suspend assumptions and certainties.

Keep these factors in mind as you enter your learning partnership. Each of these can harm the conversations or create barriers to open and honest dialogue:

- Lack of trust in the confidentiality between you.
- Style differences (communication, thinking, personality, culture).
- Desire to remain “politically correct,” which leads to unspoken truths.
- Fear of sounding ignorant, emotional, or unsure.
- Fear of being labeled a fighter and troublemaker.
- Fear of possible loss of trust/relationships.
- Fear of reprisal for being honest.
- Fear of needing to abandon personal beliefs.
- Conviction that you are right.
- Lack of awareness of biases and assumptions that could impact the interaction.
- The tendency to interrogate or ask questions with an answer implied.



Tips for giving and receiving feedback

1. Begin by asking your learning partner to share what the experience was like. Ask, "What was that experience like for you?" "What were you thinking at the time?"
2. Create an environment that reduces interference. This includes outside distractions or time pressures.
3. Focus on causing learning to happen—enlightenment, not "teaching them something."
4. Focus on behaviors that can change.
5. Limit "telling" in favor of "asking" effective questions.
6. Stay aware of subtle biases about race, gender, culture, and style that may impact how feedback is received.
7. Remain open to new and different perspectives and be ready to learn something.
8. Ask questions during the feedback process to make adjustments, test assumptions, and experiment with new possibilities.
9. Give a true and honest picture of what you think.
10. Honor your learning partner's intelligence and life experiences.



CLARIFYING VAGUE LANGUAGE

Many of us use vague language when describing situations or events. This language comes from preconceived notions and biases that become generalities. Everyone says, "It never happens," "They won't approve," and so on. Generalizations like these often keep you and your learning partner from getting at the root of issues and concerns. Vague language inhibits learning. Try to catch yourself using vague language and then shift to more precise thinking and specific language.

If you hear yourself say	Get more specific by asking yourself
Generalities <i>"They just don't give me the opportunity."</i> <i>"People say it's a tough job."</i>	Who? What opportunities? <i>Why do you think they say that?</i>
Comparisons <i>"It was good, but I still could improve."</i> <i>"She was the best manager."</i>	Improve on what? What needs to happen? Why was she the "best"? What did she do?
Self-Talk <i>"I can't." "I should have."</i> <i>"I was thinking about it."</i>	What stops you? What if you did?
Universals <i>"Everyone seems to be upset. It never happens that way."</i>	Everyone? Was there ever a time when it didn't happen that way?



STORYTELLING

One of the best ways to explain a situation or experience to each other is to use stories.

Learning partners typically tell:

Who I am stories

Why was I there stories

What I've done stories

What happened and how stories

Things I have seen stories

Pick one of these types of stories and share a real-life experience with your learning partner.



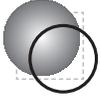
THINKING ABOUT DIFFERENCES

Your learning partner might be different from you in many ways. Race, gender, ethnicity, and other differences give us wide and various perspectives based on life experiences and personal values. When entering a learning partnership, it's important to take time to consider how these perspectives could impact your interaction.

How has your race, gender, and ethnicity shaped who you are personally?

How has your race, gender, and ethnicity shaped who you are professionally?

How could these cultural forces impact your learning partnership?



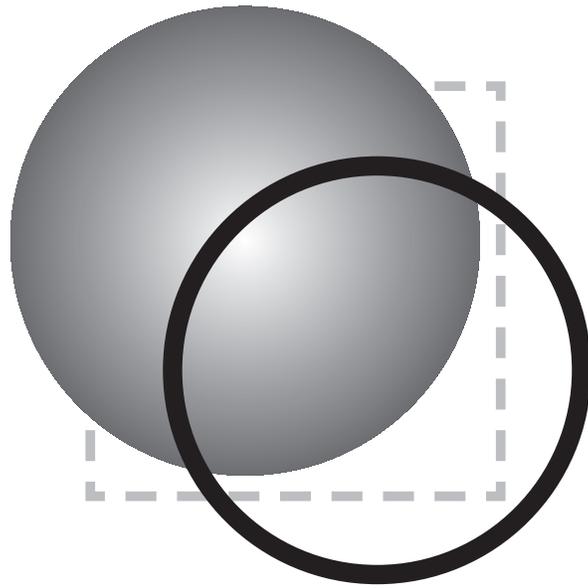
CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION

Culture: *"The collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another."*

—Geert Hofstede
Culture and Organizations: Software of the Mind

The basic components of culture are:

- 1. We are unaware of our own culture until we enter another culture or interact with someone from another culture.** For example, a fish has no concept of water until the fish is taken out of the water; then it becomes painfully aware of it. We rarely become conscious of the influence of culture until we enter or come in contact with someone from another culture and are confronted with a new perspective or different ways of doing things. We call these "sandpaper moments." They are times when things just don't feel right.
- 2. Culture shapes an individual's behavior. We are usually completely unaware of the influence of culture on our actions.** Culture is the framework that forms rules, norms, and assumptions that guide behavior and also an individual's perceptions. We make assumptions based on our own set of rules, yet they are often different from other people's rules. For instance, if someone stands too close to you, you may think that the person is rude or pushy. Personal space and what is considered a comfortable distance between two people vary culturally. Someone who stands too close to you may simply be operating under a different set of rules.



NAVIGATING YOUR CAREER

Getting Ready to Begin



GEARING UP

Tips to get the most from your learning partnership

Things to keep in mind *before*:

- RESPECT each other's time and responsibilities.
- Keep your PROMISES.
- Maintain CONFIDENTIALITY.
- Come to meetings ON TIME.
- Give the relationship the time it needs—go SLOWLY.
- There are NO DUMB questions.
- If you make a mistake, APOLOGIZE.
- Greet your learning partner with appreciation.

Things to do *during* each session:

- Set the tone for sharing by telling about yourself right away.
- Offer stories, situations, and challenges whenever possible.
- Keep your sense of humor. Make this an enjoyable session.
- Honor you and your learning partner's experience.
- Set time for further discussion and contacts.
- Add your own...

Things to do *after* each session:

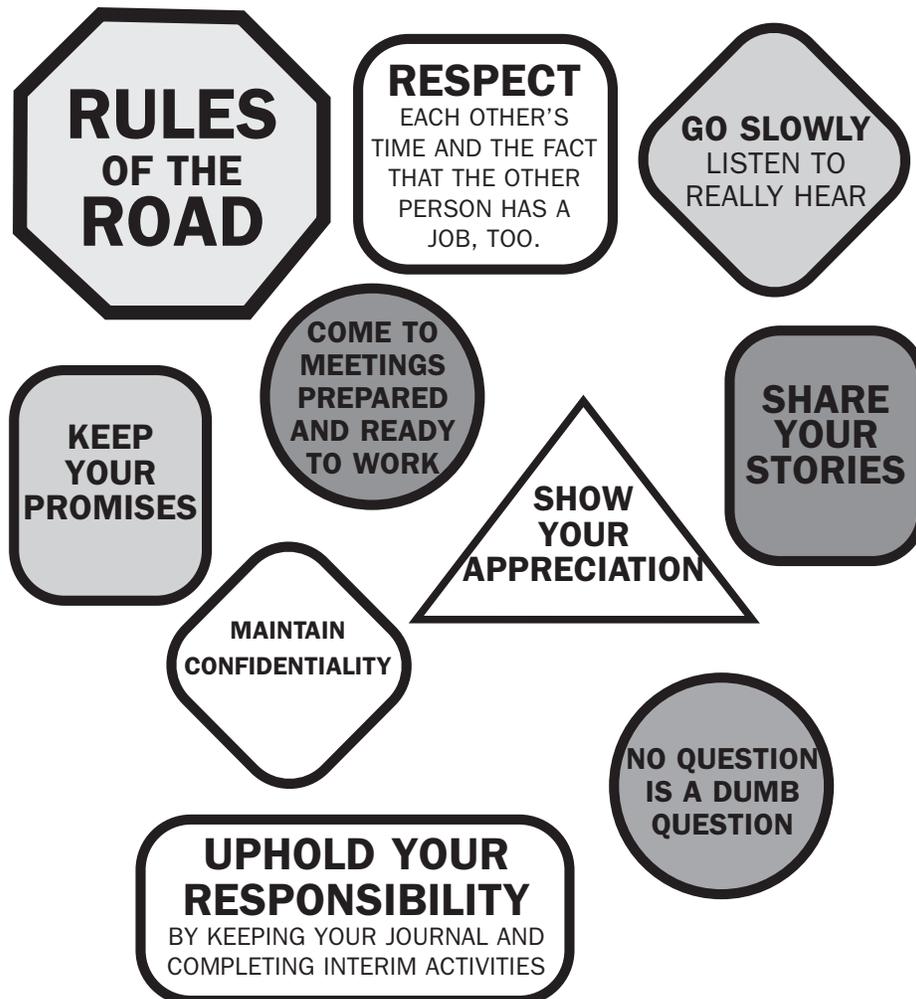
- Provide a positive comment of appreciation.
- Consult your learning partner as needed.
- Add your own...



YOUR FIRST CONVERSATION: RULES OF THE ROAD

Now that you know where you are going and where the program will take you, there are some “rules of the road” that must be followed. Just like speed limits, no passing zones, traffic lights that signal the need to start and stop, wearing safety belts, giving pedestrians the right of way, and signaling turns, partners in the learning partnership program must have some guidelines.

Here are some of the “rules of the road” you will need to follow in order to be successful as you take the learning partnership program journey.





YOUR RULES OF THE ROAD



Now get specific and create a working agreement with your learning partner.

Meetings:

Who will set them? _____

How often? _____

How long? _____

Where? _____

Rescheduling? (Who's responsible?) _____

Other? _____

Etiquette:

Contacting each other: (How to contact? When to contact? When not to?)

If I am busy... _____

What is the best way to get in touch? (voicemail, email, in person, etc.)

How will confidentiality be maintained? _____

Maintenance:

How will we make sure the relationship is working?
