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Cultivating Leadership: Mentoring Youth with Disabilities

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Cultivating Leadership: Mentoring Youth with Disabilities

Abstract

[Excerpt] A mentor is a person who through support, counsel, friendship, reinforcement and constructive example helps another person, usually a young person, to reach his or her work and life goals. Mentoring relationships provide valuable support to young people, especially those with disabilities, by offering not only academic and career guidance, but also effective role models for leadership, interpersonal and problem-solving skills. Mentoring relationships may take different forms.

Keywords

disability, disabled youth, mentorship, mentoring

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CULTIVATING LEADERSHIP: MENTORING YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES



A mentor is a person who through support, counsel, friendship, reinforcement and constructive example helps another person, usually a young person, to reach his or her work and life goals. Mentoring relationships provide valuable support to young people, especially those with disabilities, by offering not only academic and career guidance, but also effective role models for leadership, interpersonal and problem-solving skills. Mentoring relationships may take different forms:

- **Peer Mentoring:** A person close in age to his or her mentee may act as a sounding board for ideas and plans and provide guidance in an informal manner.
- **Disability Mentoring:** A person with a disability mentors another person, usually with a similar disability. The relationship generally focuses on a specific area such as living independently, recovering from a traumatic event, obtaining employment or being new to the workforce. The mentor serves as a role model and provides information and guidance specific to the mentee's experience.
- **Group Mentoring:** A mentor may work with a group of mentees.
- **E-mentoring:** An adult mentors a young person through e-mail or the Internet.

■ THE BENEFITS OF MENTORING

Regardless of the format, all mentoring relationships share a common goal of helping young people. However, young people are not the only ones who benefit from mentoring. In recent years, increasing numbers of employers have implemented mentoring programs for one simple reason—mentoring produces positive results, both immediate and for years to come.

Through mentoring, **employers** gain:

- An effective employee recruitment and retention tool
- Improved supervisory skills, work habits and productivity
- Increased employee job satisfaction
- A way to promote professional development within the organization
- An opportunity to create positive attitudinal changes in an organization's culture
- An inexpensive and easy way to positively impact their community
- An opportunity to help shape the workforce of tomorrow

Research documents that **mentors** derive the following benefits from their experience:

- Increased self-esteem
- A sense of accomplishment
- Creation of networks of volunteers
- Insight into childhood, adolescence and young adulthood
- Increased patience and improved supervisory skills

Research also indicates that **youth** benefit from mentoring. Mentoring is associated with:

- Improved academic performance
- Increased attendance rates
- Better attitudes about school
- Higher college enrollment rates and higher educational aspirations
- Enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence
- Improved behavior, both at home and at school
- Stronger relationships with parents, teachers and peers

CULTIVATING LEADERSHIP: MENTORING YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

- Improved interpersonal skills
- First-hand exposure to the workplace
- Increased career awareness and ability to make vocational and educational choices
- Decreased likelihood of dropping out of school
- Decreased likelihood of initiating drug and alcohol use

■ CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

Because mentoring relationships are between individuals, each is unique; however, all effective mentoring relationships have certain things in common. For example, the longer the relationship continues, the more positive the outcome. In addition, youth are more likely to benefit from mentoring if their mentor maintains frequent contact with them and knows their families. As a general rule, youth who are disadvantaged, or at-risk, stand to gain the most from mentoring.

Youth who perceive high-quality relationships with their mentors experience the best results. Program practices that promote quality relationships include:

- A highly qualified staff
- Screening of mentors
- Structured and regularly monitored mentoring matches
- Training for mentors, both before a match and ongoing
- A focus on the needs and interests of youth, not the expectations of mentors
- Appropriate levels of visibility and accountability built into the mentoring relationship

Research indicates that mentoring is especially effective in helping youth with disabilities transition into the workplace and adulthood. The U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) has funded pilot projects to expand the capacity of community and faith-based organizations to promote mentoring programs for youth with disabilities through intermediary organizations.

In addition, ODEP, in partnership with the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD), sponsors Disability Mentoring Day. This annual event promotes career development for students and job-seekers with disabilities through job shadowing and hands-on career exploration. Both public and private employers provide one-on-one mentoring for students to learn about the preparation necessary to qualify for a range of jobs opportunities. Disability Mentoring Day is held annually each October, but the program can be implemented by employers at any time throughout the year. For more information regarding ways in which employers can participate, visit www.dmd-aapd.org.

Other sources of information about mentoring include:

- MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership—www.mentoring.org
- The National Mentoring Center—www.nwrel.org/mentoring
- The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth—www.ncwd-youth.info
- Connecting to Success: Information on leveraging technology in mentoring programs and the use of e-mentoring—<http://ici.umn.edu/mentoring/mentors/default.html>
- Creating Mentoring Opportunities for Youth with Disabilities: Issues and Suggested Strategies—www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=704

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