



This month I'd like to replay some of the discussion I had with the senior leadership and staff at the February VISTA on the topic of professional mentoring.

Mentoring should be a common-place term in your AIA workplace by now. Hopefully you've also been part of a formal mentoring process. AFD 36-34, Air Force Mentoring Program,

defines mentoring as "a relationship in which a person with greater experience and wisdom guides another person to develop both personally and professionally." This directive, introduced in November 1996 by then-Chief-of-Staff Gen. Ronald Fogleman, specifically calls for a formal program to ensure the mentoring of all company grade officers, stating "Mentoring is a fundamental responsibility of all Air Force officers and civilian employees supervising officers. They must know their people, accept personal responsibility for them, and be accountable for their professional development."

This is true for all our junior personnel. I believe every senior AIA member can contribute to the morale and effectiveness of their unit by actively seeking out opportunities to mentor our junior members. Likewise, it's important for our junior troops to know they can talk to and seek guidance from people other than their supervisors.

It should be made clear that mentoring is not a new concept, nor should it be viewed as the latest Air Force trend in personnel programs. Most, if not all, successful Air Force leaders will tell you they've had one or more mentors during their career that had an early impact on their professional development and influenced their attitudes and beliefs about followership and leadership. The Air Force is simply formalizing this process to ensure that all our young officer, enlisted, and civilian troops have access to experienced counsel from senior members who can encourage their career aspirations with effective mentoring. But access is not enough.

There will be some junior personnel who won't actively pursue mentoring opportunities, so it is the job of senior leaders to seek them out with the message that the personal and professional development of our members is of the highest priority within AIA and the Air Force.

Senior guidance should consist of career advice as well as discussions on the attributes of leadership and character, with particular emphasis on the Air Force core values

of integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do. Leaders should use AFI 36-3410, Air Force Mentoring, as guidance to tailor their own programs within their units. Further guidance is also provided in the AIA Human Resources Development Guide distributed in June 1997. This guide outlines the strategic importance of a strong mentoring program within AIA in achieving our Agency's long-term human resource development goals.

Mentoring should not be confined to performance feedback or confused with sponsorship. Performance feedback is between a member and his or her immediate supervisor, whereas mentoring can and should extend beyond the formal reporting chain. However, many of the same areas that are discussed during feedback sessions should be addressed during mentoring sessions as well: promotion, PME, advanced degree work, physical fitness, personal goals and expectations, professional qualities, next assignment, and long-range plans.

Sponsorship implies a kind of promotion enhancement program and can have negative connotations within the unit. The focus of mentoring should be professional development, not promotion. Mentors must always maintain a professional relationship with junior personnel and must be equally available to all members, not just select individuals.

With all the recent concerns regarding the status of morale, OPSTEMPO, PERSTEMPO, job satisfaction, etc., we need mentoring in the workplace now more than ever. Besides helping individual members reach their full potential as professional airmen, mentoring, in a broader sense, will enhance unit morale and discipline, improving the operational environment in which we conduct our critical missions.

Mentoring is an ongoing process between senior and junior personnel - officer, enlisted, and civilian. Over time, a strong mentoring program will create a climate of mutual trust, genuine concern for the welfare of subordinates, clear expectations, and enhanced esprit de corps. It is imperative that we take advantage of this opportunity now to contribute to the development of our leaders of tomorrow.

*James E. Mills*