

Real World Mentoring Fundamentals A Practical Guide to Building-Up Security Professionals

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Extended Abstract

Mentoring is an important aspect of building strong Security Professionals. It impacts corporate culture in a positive manner, and greatly increases retention. This paper will cover key fundamentals to building a mentoring program, as well as specific topics that a mentor or a manager could use for discussion points while mentoring and coaching security professionals. We will cover topics such as characteristics of effective mentors, real world guidance for common situations, 'building brand' and working with others in a positive manner. You will gain real and practical guidance from this article which you can immediately put to use as a mentor.

When one conjures up images of mentoring, they immediately think of a wise bearded oracle late in his years, imparting his lifelong wisdom to a youngster about to go off and start his adult life. Well...although that is probably how we saw it in Hollywood movies from time to time, this is not exactly how it works in the real world. The fact of the matter is effective mentors represent a wide diversity of age, experience and personality types within the industry. Although it is true that not everybody is the right fit to be a mentor, most security practitioners who have been in the industry long enough have a tremendous amount to offer. The key is establishing a program that empowers mentors, along with guidelines and training for effectiveness.

A successful mentoring program not only helps out mentees with their career aspirations, but can have a positive impact on your company's culture as well. Security professionals who have been successfully mentored not only have a more positive view of their team and company, but will certainly have a higher retention rate as well. Given the state of today's job market for qualified technical professionals...this alone makes establishing a strong mentoring program an attractive project for any organization.

This report, although certainly not the only tool you will need, will get you started on the right road with some practical guidance. We will cover 'key' topics mentors are recommended to discuss, as well as specific guidelines that are important for your program's success.

To start with, the mentoring relationship should be around six months to one year, but no longer. Remember...this is not meant to be a permanent thing. In corporate mentoring, the idea is for the mentor to have enough time to make a positive impact, but not have things drag on to the point where the relationship languishes and becomes non-productive. I personally prefer six months, as this gives the mentor enough time to cover key topics, but also allows for up to two distinct mentors per mentee per year. This provides multiple perspectives on key professional development topics.

For those looking to mentor, one of the very first objectives you have is to establish a trust relationship. This is absolutely essential and if possible, it is always best to meet in person. However, depending on the nature of your company, you may have to do this remotely. When possible, do your best to leverage technology such as video conferencing, as this will help create a better conversational bond regardless of the geographical distance. On my initial phone call to introduce myself, I will always have a short and topical conversation letting the mentee know that I am truly looking forward to the relationship

and that on our subsequent first scheduled call, I will be sharing a bit about myself, and would like him/her to then share about themselves. This is the first obstacle [and an important one!] to hurdle over for the relationship to get off on the right foot. By announcing your expectations up front, you give your mentee time to mentally prepare for this first scheduled meeting. Sometimes 'getting personal' can be difficult, and although I am not stereotyping [OK...I am], it can be even more difficult for employees in the IT technical workforce.

In that first scheduled meeting, the mentor should always go first, and share about themselves. Yes...get personal! This is an opportunity for you to share how you got to where you are today, and what is important to you. However, this is not a time to brag, but instead to be real with your mentee. Share your successes, and yes, any key failures that helped make you who you are today. It is important that the mentee sees that like everyone else, you have had your share of challenges and the humility to talk about it. In taking this approach, you will not only open the door for the mentee to feel comfortable enough to share about him/herself, but you will also allow for trust to take root right away. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of this first step. If a potential mentor is not willing to get personal up front...they may not be suited to be a mentor at all. Remember, just because your Tier III Forensics Analyst is the top technical guy in the organization...does not necessarily mean that he is the right person for building up other security professionals.

I recommend a bi-weekly meeting cadence, and that would be the same regardless of whether it will happen remotely on the phone or face to face in the office. Once you have gone through the first step of 'initiating trust', a good first topic to cover is 'Brand Building'. This is one of the most important and impactful topics a mentor can cover with their mentee.

Building brand should be an exploratory topic in which you listen to the mentee's career aspirations and their current situation as a security professional, and then begin the process of helping them take concrete actions that will help them get there. I will mention it a few times in this article, but assigning small homework assignments for your mentee is encouraged. This helps stretch the security professional that you are helping, and later in life they will thank you for it.

Although this list is not exhaustive, it is certainly a core set of sub-topics to explore with your mentee based on what they initially share with you regarding their career aspirations. I always make it a point to discuss the following areas:

- Professional Security Organizations [InfraGard, ASIS International, HTCIA, (ISC)², etc.]
- Certifications [Security+, CISSP, CEH, etc.]
- Reading Rhythm [SC Magazine, books, blogs, etc.]
- Exotics

The discussion of 'Exotics' is always an area that I spend a substantial amount of time in with a mentee. This is because in my experience, there is no other area in which a security engineer's professional 'Brand' is built more strongly than in 'Exotics'. So...what is this, you ask? An exotic is basically any aspect of the Engineer's job function that is not part of his/her core duties. It is the 'Above and Beyond'. In the world of professional 'Brand Building' this is a key area a strong mentor can really help develop. If you were to take a moment and reflect upon the most successful people you know in our field, they are typically men and women who have stretched themselves well beyond the boundaries of their traditional roles. However, and this is where a solid mentor can help...not beyond their capabilities or in a manner that would seem to be reckless by the organization they work for.

Exotics are crucial to brand building because it establishes your knowledge, abilities and willingness to help others inside and outside the company. Examples of exotics for the Security Engineer include:

- Field Documentation for the broader company team
- Internal technical teaching
- External Speaker at a professional security organization chapter meeting [(ISC)², InfraGard, etc.]

- Guest Speaker at a larger Industry Event [i.e. Annual Conference]
- Creating Internal Training Videos
- Acting as a Product 'Technical' Lead in your department
- Performing Competitive/Comparative Analysis of similar security products
- Building and Maintaining a 'Product Lab'
- Mentoring
- Post Sales Customer work
- Studying for and gaining a new certification

Keep in mind that this list, although full of certainly impactful 'real' exotics, is merely a sample list to promote a creative thought process which you and your mentee can explore together. It is this kind of real and honest conversation that a mentee will be tremendously grateful for later in life as their career moves forward.

Don't be afraid to take multiple sessions to cover these two deep topics with your mentee. It may take up to two months depending on the dynamics between mentor and mentee. As long as the conversation is constructive and moving forward properly...this is quite fine. Once you feel that these topics have been covered, you can move on to other key areas of discussion.

Keep in mind that your bi-weekly calls should stay on track. One of the hazards that mentors may face is getting derailed by the mentee's desire to share a current 'tactical' issue they are facing that week. It is OK to discuss these things early in the call, but as the mentor you must be time-aware, and if the issue is complex and time consuming, make it a point to let the mentee know that you want to give it the attention it deserves, and therefore you will schedule a separate appointment to discuss it. This is very important, as it disciplines your bi-weekly call to cover the key strategic discussion points you need to explore with your mentee, without dismissing what very well may be a 'real' operational issue they are facing right now, and want guidance on.

'Corporate relationships' is the next broad topic that I typically explore with my mentee, and I would urge mentors to spend adequate time in this area. The first discussion point should be around their boss. This is one of the most important relationships in your mentee's life. A mentor can truly help their mentee develop this relationship in a strong and constructive manner. If ever there was an area in which a good mentor can help someone grow...it is here.

You can begin to pose thought provoking questions to your mentee as you cover this topic. This type of mental wrestling will stretch your mentee and help them build a stronger relationship with their manager. A sample of key questions you can ask your mentee include:

- How often do you speak with your boss?
- How often do you meet him/her face to face?
- Rating from 1 to 10, what would you rate your relationship at?
- What do you have in common with your boss?

As I mentioned earlier, don't be afraid to assign small homework assignments to your mentee. Something like, "The next time we get together for our bi-weekly meeting, I would like you to tell me two new things you have learned about your manager". These little assignments are constructive as they will gauge the seriousness level your mentee is putting towards their personal growth, and will also help them in a real and meaningful way. This will stretch them in areas they may not have done by themselves.

In the realm of corporate relationships, you will also want to explore the topic of their immediate work group or team. Sometimes this area can be overlooked, but it is especially important if the mentee is fairly new to your organization and trying to fit in to an existing team of security professionals. Before exploring this topic with your mentee, I always recommend that you have a confidential conversation with your mentee's manager to gain insight from his or her perspective. This will be valuable to you in assessing the 'self-awareness' of your mentee. It is not uncommon, especially amongst technical people, to see a lack of self-awareness or blind spots in someone. As a mentor, you can uncover these, and gently and gracefully

help a mentee gain greater awareness. Here is a list of valuable and thought provoking questions you as a mentor can ask as you explore this topic together.

- Tell me about the dynamics of your team?
- Who do you feel 'tightest' with on your team?
- Who is the biggest 'complainer' on your team?
- Who is the newest member of your team?
- From 1 to 10, what would you say your team cohesiveness level is?

Other topics that you can constructively discuss with your mentee include how to make the most of trips to the corporate headquarters [if you don't already work at that location], technology/product discussions from a career perspective, and tactical career path decisions. For example, does your mentee know exactly what steps he/she needs to take in order to gain a promotion? Even if their promotion eligibility is over a year away, the right time to understand these steps and have a plan to achieve them is not when they CAN be promoted, but at least a year prior to that! You can truly help enable your mentee in a positive manner in this area.

As you approach the six month mark, make sure you let your mentee know the last meeting is coming up, so they are prepared for that. This becomes especially true if you have created a strong bond over the time you have been mentoring. Although your friendship does not have to end, it is important to have a 'closure' last call to formally end the mentoring relationship. This is important, as the mentee's manager may want another senior security engineer to mentor this upcoming security professional. If you developed a great relationship with your mentee, there is certainly nothing wrong with checking in with them from time to time, but now it will be as a friend/co-worker and a bit more informal.

Finally, remember that you (as the mentor) need to have 'go to' people in your life as well. Sometimes situations are very complex, and the career of a young Security Professional is in the balance of your decisions and guidance. That is a sobering reality and hopefully any mentor takes seriously. Mentors should have the common sense to bounce complex situations off of their mentor, peer or their manager for validation.

Those fortunate enough to make it to the Senior ranks in this demanding industry should take some time to introspectively ask whether or not they are mentor material. It is an opportunity to make a difference in a younger security professional's life, and to have a positive impact on our industry in general. If your organization does not have a formal mentoring program in place, consider proposing this as a new initiative in your department. You will be glad you did, and your organization will be stronger because of it.
