The Power of Mentors

People with mentors are invariably more successful than those who go it alone, and the best way to find mentors is to ask people if they'd like to mentor you. Almost everyone is flattered to be asked to serve in a mentoring role. Before you ask, however, keep in mind this advice from Ben Casnocha's *My Start-Up Life* (Jossey-Bass, www.josseybass.com):

- **Understand the difference** between mentors and advisors. You consult advisors on professional issues, while mentors veer into personal matters. It's important to have both.
- **Diversify.** Maintain an eclectic group of mentors so that you have people to consult about all sorts of different things – some to ask about issues of emotion and spirit, others to help you digest complex situations, and so on.
- **Find good people.** Do research on people and know what makes them tick before initiating a relationship.
- **Give as well as receive.** Mentors need to derive a return from helping you. Provide plenty of appreciation, and ensure the relationship isn't a one-way street, or it won't last.

A Guide to Good Management

A powerful new book may be the most important addition to your library. Although it's only 93 pages long, this little paperback sums up what's needed to gain the trust of your stakeholders and the public.

Advancing Nonprofit Stewardship through Self-Regulation: Translating Principles into Practice (published by Kumarian Press (www.kpbooks.com) is based on 33 principles proposed by Independent Sector (www.independentsector.org). These principles are designed to help nonprofits regulate themselves by following best practices for sound, ethical management.

In Part 1, Christopher Corbett lists the 33 principles, with brief comments on each. In Part 2, he translates the principles into bylaws, which your organization can implement readily.

The best way for nonprofits to avoid onerous government restrictions is to regulate themselves. Using these bylaws may be the best way to do so.

— reviewed by Terrence Fernsler

I'm Sorry, You Have Two Minutes

Imagine this. You've worked for several weeks to prepare a 30-minute presentation. You walk into the room and they say, "Listen, sorry, we're really behind... uh...can you cover this in two minutes?"

What do you do? First, count your lucky stars. That's right. This is your day. You've just been presented with an opportunity to wow your audience.

There's nothing more impressive than a person who knows how to be brief. What every meeting attendee longs for is a presentation that takes *less* time. You can feel them exhale when you promise, "Sure, let me just summarize," and then, you actually do.

So here's the drill. Right before you put your presentation to bed, take a half hour to prepare a two-minute outline composed of:

- your main idea in 25 words or less
- three supporting statements, facts, or observations
- your final recommendation or call to action.

Don't consider yourself ready until you've done this. Even if you get your full time, you might end up on the elevator with someone who asks, "So, what are you working on?" Nice to have that 25-word summary in your back pocket.

Imagine those two minutes, and figure out how to shine. Prepare to astound your audience. When you walk out the door, they'll want to applaud, and they won't forget what you've said.

Two minutes? Not a problem! In fact, what an opportunity.

— by Suzanne Bates, www.thepowerspeakerblog.com, www.batescommunication.com

Study Underscores Importance of Background Checks

Over 20% of volunteer background checks conducted by nonprofits revealed serious issues, including drug-related and sex-related offenses, murder and kidnapping charges, and cases of registered sex offenders, a new study finds. The study, "The Power of Positive Information" (www.lexisnexis.com/nonprofit) shares best practices and program recommendations:

- **Develop** a standard, automated screening policy.
- **Re-screen** volunteers on a regular basis.
- **Supplement** a national criminal database search with a county-level search.

Develop a Strategy the Smart Way

Strategic planning fails when it has fuzzy objectives, too many people, and a rushed schedule. When you need to develop a strategy fast, do it the right way:

- **Define the challenge.** Your leadership team can't settle on a path forward unless everyone agrees on the problem you're trying to solve. Once you're aligned, focus on core questions and avoid meandering discussions.
- **Identify the destination.** Define the future state and how to get there. Don't try to please everyone; make the hard choices that lead to a clear strategy.
- **Develop options.** Changes in the marketplace are inevitable. Come up with alternative approaches that let you respond to uncertain events.

— adapted from "Six Strategy Insights" from *Harvard Business Review* blog (blogs.bbr.org)

Communicating to Pack a Punch

If you want to write stronger reports, speeches, and presentations, take the advice of top journalists: Don't bury the lead.

Journalist, author, screenwriter, and funny woman Nora Ephron once told a story to illustrate this point. When Ephron was in high school, the teacher asked the class to write a lead for this story:

"Kenneth L. Peters, principal of Beverly Hills High School, announced today that the entire school faculty will travel to Sacramento next Thursday for a colloquium in new teaching methods. Among the speakers will be anthropologist Margaret Mead, college professor Dr. Robert Maynard Hutchins, and California governor Edmund 'Pat' Brown."

Ephron condensed the five Ws — who, what, where, when, and why — into a sentence: "Governor Pat Brown, Margaret Mead, and Robert Maynard Hutchens will address the Beverly Hills High School faculty Thursday in Sacramento."

The teacher collected the leads and scanned them. Then he said, "The lead of the story is this: 'There will be no school next Thursday.' "

It's not enough to know the who, what, when, where, and how; you have to know why it matters. And whether it's a report, story, speech, or presentation, when you report what matters early on, you're guaranteed to garner attention.

— by Randy Siegel, randy@buildourleaders.com

How to Have a Difficult Conversation

Use these ideas next time you need to have a difficult conversation:

Decide on your goal in advance. It isn't always necessary, or even productive, to bring up an issue and resolve it in the same conversation. Whatever your goal, be clear about it, and share it with your conversational partner.

Suppose, for example, that every time you send out an organization-wide e-mail, your colleague Jen hits "Reply All" and vents her frustrations, criticisms, and disapproval of your ideas to everyone in the organization. Your goal may simply be to learn more about it, so you might say, "I'd like to talk about how you respond to my e-mails and learn more about your reactions to them."

Explore the issue together, as opposed to putting the other person on the "witness stand." State in general terms what the issue is, and then discuss it together. You might say, for example, "I've noticed that you reply to everyone when I send out e-mails. I was wondering if we can look at that together." Working together to learn more will avoid making the other person defensive or uncooperative.

Spend more time listening than talking. A key leadership skill is understanding other points of view. After raising the issue, wait for the other person to respond rather than giving more of your perspective. Ask questions instead of making statements.

Consider alternatives. Ask for the other person's ideas about handling the situation. You might say, "Jen, what else can you do about your frustration over my e-mails without communicating that frustration to the entire staff?" She'll be more likely to accept an alternative that she offers.

Work toward what's next. Have a clear understanding of what kind of follow up is expected, and agree on a time to talk or check in again. For example, you and Jen may decide that in the future, when she's frustrated, she'll shoot you an e-mail as a way of venting, without involving the rest of the staff. You and she may agree to try that, and to talk again in two weeks to see how it's going.

Be flexible in your approach. If the other person doesn't appear ready to receive your feedback, or becomes defensive, learn more by asking questions. The answers will give you additional data that may lead you to change the goal of your meeting or adjust how you want to address the issue.

— adapted from *The Weiman Consulting Letter,* www.weimanconsulting.com