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Are We Failing the Next Generation and Ourselves?

By Rebecca Winston

Not long ago I wrote a thought opinion piece on mentoring and how it was part of what a professional should give back to his or her profession. I am coming back to this topic because of three experiences recently that have not only reinforced my previous position but also in many respects made the necessity of mentoring in our profession as well as others as a priority. Yes, I said priority. It is not something that is the courteous, professional, nice thing to do. It is a must.

Mentoring for the purposes of this piece is not just the sharing of the occasional piece of wisdom. It is the active care and feeding of those individuals who will take our positions in the future. While it is hard to reflect on the fact that each of us can be replaced, the fact is we can if we view ourselves as a package of skill sets. Yes, we may deploy them uniquely within the framework of personality and that may indeed make us irreplaceable to a certain extent, but replaceable we are.

So what drove me to say that mentoring is a must for preparing our replacements? First, as I was preparing research for another piece of text that I am writing, I encountered an article entitled, “Why Don’t More Senior Leaders Mentor? And How They Are Mortgaging Their Company’s Future in the Process”, written by Andrew M. Satter and Diane E. Russ.¹ The thesis of the article is, “Large organizations are facing a pending talent drain when baby boomer generation senior leaders begin retiring over the 3 to 5 years.”(382)

¹ Satter, Andrew M. and Russ, Diane E., “Why Don’t More Senior Leaders Mentor? And How They Are Mortgaging Their Company’s Future in the Progress”, J. of Management Inquiry, V. 16, N. 4, Dec. 2007. Pgs. 382-390.

The second trigger was listening to individuals at an international meeting speaking casually in the lounge of the hotel about the fact that so many individuals who enter the profession of project management can speak the basic lingo or the lingo per the software program they learned, but they really do not know how to conduct themselves in the day-to-day business of project management.

Finally, a series of meetings with government officials within two United States agencies had a part of their focus on the graying (aging) of their and their contractors workforces. The lament in this discussion was twofold: (1) we have an experience, knowledge gap and (2) those who will succeed will not be armed with the necessary background to offer the checks and balances when it comes to oversight of the contractor project management activities.

From all three moments, one might surmise that we would be marshalling our collective selves into boardrooms, conference calls, or other modes for the purposes of immediate strategic planning. However, the article I cited would indicate that we are either wringing our hands or hoping that “a dominant position in the marketplace” will ease us over the gap until the future leaders in our profession become seasoned. (383) Observation would indicate that we are willing to commence project review “beatings” until the next generation either learns it the difficult way or quits. The productiveness of this approach as well as its overall cost/benefit ratio should be questioned whether one is in private industry or government.

What is so wrong with mentoring? Yes, it takes the investment of time and time costs. The cost is a present cost to avoid a larger, more catastrophic cost in the future. However, since we give so much of ourselves to our work efforts, our profession, do not we want to see it carried forward in the best manner possible?

The article referred to surveyed reasons why senior leaders did not mentor. Those reasons included the fact that they had not been mentored, the tremendous pressures to perform and deliver that they are under; it would undermine their position of dominance, and many others. (384) All of these reasons or excuses have some real or perceived validity. For example, in

today's marketplace whether on is in government or the private sector, one is probably doing more work due to the trimming of the workforce. Industry and government are stretching human resources and expecting more from them. Why would one take on more effect?

There is no single, tangible reason for most of us as the entity for which we work will most likely not reward us. But it is the "joy in watching young people grow and move on." (384) It is the, "rewards and satisfaction of contributing to another individual's growth and success . . ." (384) that far outweighs the investment of time and effort.

Knowledge and its management is not just a lessons learned process from one project to the next. It is a human life cycle project for each of us to begin to experience as project managers. If I can be so bold, we cannot afford to hold our knowledge as power to share the nuggets of knowledge only when there is a paper to be written or a contract to be won. We must invest in the next generations who will manage the renewable energy programs, send the spacecrafts to the other galaxies to explore, and build the next communication hi-ways. We are our own "future" developers.

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Rebecca (Becky) Winston, Esq., JD, PMI Fellow, is a former Chair of the Board of Directors of the Project Management Institute (PMI®). An experienced expert on the subject of project management (PM) in the fields of research & development (R&D), energy, environmental restoration and national security, she is well known throughout the United States and globally as a leader in the PM professional world. Becky has over 25 years of experience in program and project management, primarily on programs funded by the US government. She is a graduate of the University of Nebraska's College of Law, Juris Doctorate (1980), in Lincoln, Nebraska and has a Bachelor's of Science (BS) degree in Education from Nebraska Wesleyan University in the USA. Active in PMI since 1993, Rebecca Winston helped pioneer PMI's Specific Interest Groups (SIGs) in the nineties, including the Project Earth and Government SIGs, and was a founder and first co-chair of the Women in Project Management SIG. She served two terms on the PMI board of directors and was elected a PMI Fellow in 2005. She is a licensed attorney and a member of the American Bar Association and the Association of Female Executives in the USA. She has extensive recent PM experience in the areas of national defense and security, and has worked closely with local, regional and national officials, including federal agencies, the US Congress and the Pentagon. Becky is currently Chair of the US Technical Advisory Group for the new ISO Standard for Project Management, currently under development. She also serves as a Global Advisor to PMForum and is a PM Ambassador™, available for international speaking engagements. She lives in Idaho Falls, Idaho, USA.