

Value of a Mentor

By Ken Schimpf

For the first 13 years of my pursuit of officiating success, I thought I was pretty good. When I discovered the value of a mentor seven years ago, I actually started to become not half bad. If you don't have a mentor today, you should have one by tomorrow morning.

When I began basketball officiating in 1990, I listened to a lot of advice from well-meaning officials. I'm not sure I actually heard a word of it for almost a decade-and-a-half. Officials offered that trick or that tip as I tried to improve my abilities and schedule. Most of it, I didn't apply and downright ignored. I did it my way. In fact, when would-be mentors suggested how I should adapt different mechanics and philosophies, I can still hear myself saying: "Thanks, but that's not how I do it". For 13 years, my method worked perfectly. It earned me exactly what I deserved – a so-so schedule at a variety of levels and not much potential for advancement. Most of my peers knew I had my own agenda, fairly closed-minded attitude and was headed on my own course. Doing it my way and not accepting the mentoring of others didn't work very well. Then, Eureka!

In fall 2003, over a plate of salsa and tortilla chips discussing a totally different subject than officiating, I found my my first mentor. A fellow basketball official offered some professional career advice regarding our daytime jobs. I considered him a peer from 9 a.m to 5 p.m. and took his suggestions. Later that week, it dawned on me that if I trusted that individual for counsel on business matters, why shouldn't I do the same in refereeing?

For the upcoming season, I put my trust in that official and attempted to do everything he asked of me on the court. I changed mechanics so they became more polished. I listened and communicated better with partners and I put a greater focus on working my primary. Lo and behold, it worked. On a nightly basis, games went more smoothly. It seemed that by simply applying the valuable instructions of my new mentor, games were a much easier task. A lot of new things started to occur: less difficulty with coaches, less worry about the last call I had made, a dramatic decrease in the need to write game reports, more positive feelings after each game, more opportunities to work games and most importantly, more respect for my officiating skills from my peers.

I'm not sure to this day that we've never used the word "mentor" in my discussions with my first mentor, but we both know that we have that relationship. In fact, I'd like to think that we've moved from him simply mentoring me to a situation today where we mentor each other.

Another benefit to accepting my mentor's advice came as I learned that there were many other folks he considered as mentors to his career. And he thought those folks mentoring him could help me and opened the lines of communications. From those conversations, I've actually developed a network of a half-dozen mentors. It is from that group of mentors that nearly all of my current philosophy on officiating and the demeanor I use in working games have evolved. If I'm struggling with how to respond to a particular coach's comment, I ask for opinions. If I can't figure out how to get a better look as the lead official on a drive down the center of the lane, I ask.

Currently, I communicate with at least one of my mentors every day – in season or out. Some days we simply provide support to each other in the day-to-day grind of a hectic season and recant what plays we saw on television last night; on other days, we provide longer-term thinking and planning to each other about our officiating careers.

With such a valuable tool out there, how should you go about finding a mentor? The first step is finding someone whose skills and career outside officiating you admire and respect. Except for a small handful, most officials simply are aggressively working an avocation, not a vocation. But how successful your mentor is outside of officiating in their career and personal life is a better indication of what type of advice you'll receive. If your mentor has been a successful school teacher, businessperson or salesperson, the knowledge they've used to succeed there will likely help in officiating.

Second, you should be willing to discuss all aspects of you and your personality with your mentor. Nothing should be hands-off. Your actions on the court are more a reflection of who you are as a person than almost anything. A mentor needs to have the flexibility to discuss your character and personality without hesitation. If you can't take that type of discussion from the mentor you choose, select one that you can. If you can't hear from your mentor what things about you might rub someone the wrong way, then you're not ready for mentoring.

Your mentor might have a different style on the court – don't be afraid of that fact. As a matter of fact, embrace it. You can't fall victim to being a clone. While you may view a play the same, the way you call a blocking foul might be more exuberant than your mentor (or vice versa). The amount of rope you provide to an exuberant coach might be different. Your understanding of illegal contact on a post player or definition of when to grant a timeout might be different. Discuss those issues and be open to different viewpoints. If you don't agree, accept it and move on.

Finally, don't be afraid to have more than one mentor. Personally, my network of mentors has turned out well. It may be that two mentors are better for you, or even one. But certainly be willing to try more than one before settling into a comfort zone. There's nothing wrong with taking a season-long test drive before making the personal decision on a mentor.

Once you establish a mentor, your mentor will likely become your friend, perhaps even a best friend. That's OK. Human relationships evolve from working closely together. Within that context, however, you should agree ahead of time when you're entering a mentoring discussion. Do not let friendship and mentoring blend the lines. If you need to, pick a favorite place to meet or establish clear guidelines and phrases that indicate when a mentor is being just that.

Don't be afraid to ask someone to be your mentor. It is the responsibility of someone looking for advice to be proactive. I would be hesitant about someone who approached me about being my mentor. Those types of mentors often have an agenda that's more about them than you. However, as someone who has learned to believe strongly in a mentor, I'm not afraid to indicate that I am willing to be a mentor. I simply would not target specific individuals that I would like to work with, but rather let it be known that I can be approached in a general sense among my peer group or association members.

As cliched as it might sound, if you lead by example, others will want to follow. You'll get noticed through your assignments and casual conversations will turn into that mentoring relationship. During the last seven years, my mentors have been a valuable resource to me. I'm certain that my officiating resume would be entirely different had I not opened my eyes and ears to the concept.

If you're looking for a way to develop and improve, it begins with a mentor.

Ken Schimpf III, Pewaukee, Wis., is a high school basketball official who also serves as president for the Eastern Wisconsin Officials Association.