

SES CDP: Mentoring

With respect to mentoring, I think that it's a word that has a lot of meaning, and we have very specific mentoring programs throughout Interior. We think about mentoring as being this formal relationship, and in fact when you start classes, particularly senior leadership classes or mid-level leadership classes, you'll be assigned a mentor or you'll choose a mentor, and so that formal process I think gives you some insight and some opportunities to explore some specific questions or some specific areas that you'd like to learn about and do a better job, so selecting a good mentor for that I think is important, someone with experience, someone that's willing to spend the time and talk with you, someone that's got the time to actually check with people that you're interacting with to get some feedback so they can give you appropriate feedback. All of that formal mentoring process I think is very, very valuable and should be taken advantage of, but there are other forms of mentoring that go on, and I don't know if that meets specifically the term mentoring, but I do look at some experiences I've had in the past and very much feel that I was mentored by folks even though they might not realize that they were my mentors at the time.

I'm thinking a little bit about the role that mentoring has played in my development and my career, and it's played a major role. I can tell you without a doubt that I would not have made it into the senior executive ranks had I not had a stream of good informal mentors. Most of the time I would seek these mentors out and say you know, one example is I was working in the departmental budget office, and I knew I didn't want to be a budget officer as a career. I liked knowing

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the budget and how it worked, but I didn't want to only do that. I had interests in other areas as well, and I wanted something more like I have now where I had human resources under me and other administrative responsibilities, and so I went to another manager who is a long-term senior executive, had had a great reputation and was very solid, and actually he was a brilliant guy, and I asked him what I should do, and he told me my next move from being a staff person in the department budget office should be to look to a natural resources program to supervise or be a deputy supervisor and to go into a bureau, leave the department, and get the diversified experience of working at a bureau at an operational level and to make sure I managed a strong core, a complement of staff, not a small staff, more like 15 to 20 people, and he was very explicit about these three things, the things I should do next. It was incredibly helpful, and I went off and did that.

You know, as I reflect back on my career I realize that I've really benefited from having some mentors, both formal and informal, to guide me in my career development. I reflect back when I first started as a GS-3 and had a gentleman, his name was Gus Clay and he was a seasoned executive in the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and I had just come out of college and I was an idealist, and I was gonna change the world, as many of us young college folks do as we think, and I got excited about something and said it wasn't right, and he sat me down and we had a nice long conversation where he told me that there are many perspectives on particular issues and that while I may be correct in

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saying part of what I was dealing with wasn't right, that he shared with me some other perspectives that made me realize that I didn't have the only set of eyes and some of these issues that we're working with in the public sector are multi-dimensional and they're often complex and have many stakeholders and many segments of the public that are affected differently by what we do, and in effect he broadened my horizon by just taking me aside and asking me to think about looking at the particular issue from other perspectives. So to this day I remember carrying that with me. He also told me that remember, there are very few things in life you want to die on your sword over, and as I worked through my career I kept that in mind as well. You don't want to die too many times. What he was trying to tell me was to try to keep everything in perspective and know when you really want to push an issue and to elevate it to the appropriate level, and I think that was guidance well-founded. I also had a chance to work with another gentleman, Bob Fagan, who back in the '80s he was one of the first SESers. When we developed the SES class he was in that at the age of 31, so he was sort of a young whiz kid, but he had a lot of confidence in me and I was a GS-12, I remember one time a GS-12, and he had the assignment as an SES to make a presentation to OPM. It was a group of about 75 people, and he was talking about management systems and I had been working on that for him, and he couldn't do it. Something came up, and when his boss asked him to identify somebody who would make the presentation, he asked me. Here I am at a GS-12 talking to a bunch of SESers from OPM about our management systems and how we deal with performance and accountability. It was kind of daunting for me,

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but it gave me a boost of confidence and it's something again, as one of my informal mentors, really helped me as I moved along. The last individual I think about fondly is the last person that I worked for at HUD before I left there, and his name was Chris Rusillo and he was noted for somebody who could see the forest for the trees, and he had this great uncanny ability to be able to sort out issues and look at the big picture and to be able to focus on that and not get caught up in some of the side issues that often emerge and distract us from what we're trying to do.

So mentoring can be formal or it can be informal. The informal mentoring I think comes more perhaps naturally from relationships or it's something that if you're a person that likes to analyze situations or analyze interactions between people, you can actually make folks into mentors just by I guess studying their actions and their behavior. I look back many times that I've worked with folks or for folks, watched their actions, and thought of them and used them as mentors but never really sat down and had a mentor sort of conversation with them. Just watching their actions, watching how they communicate, watching how they behave around other people, how they empower folks beneath them to get jobs done, those sorts of things, are all important lessons to learn, and so there are mentors out there that you can see and use both from an informal or a formal standpoint. Both have great utility doing different things, and I wouldn't try to use one or the other. I would try to avail myself to both formal and informal mentoring throughout your career.