

A Restorative Model of Mentoring for Black Community Growth

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The journey into the realm of mentoring is often shaped by a convergence of personal experiences and intellectual pursuits. For me, this convergence manifests through the dual pathways of lived experiences as a person of African descent and an in-depth exploration of African institutions, rituals, and practices. These two trajectories intersect in a transformative moment—an encounter at an Amtrak station in August 1994, marking the genesis of my commitment to mentoring.

In the nascent stages of my teaching career, a serendipitous encounter while waiting for the train to arrive connected me with a retired master teacher. Fate, in the form of a delayed train, allowed me the privilege of conversing with a retired Pittsburgh Public Schools teacher who had recently concluded an illustrious 47-year career. I stood at the cusp of my first full-time teaching assignment, eager and slightly nervous about the impending school year. She awaited a train to Chicago. Little did I know when I started the conversation, her words would profoundly shape my journey. Immediately after the conversation, I knew that I was forever transformed.

Amidst the hum of the station, I inquired about advice for a new teacher. Her response was delivered with a regality of authority and wisdom. "Listen... Know this," she emphasized, placing her left hand on my knee.

Did you hear what I said? I didn't say believe this, or understand this, I said know this. Know that there are no bad kids. You are going to come across some kids that give you trouble, that give you mouth, and some kids that may not want to have anything to do with you today. But they aren't bad kids. Every one of these kids that you see acting up like this, has one of three things going on. She is either misled, misfed, or misunderstood. It's your job as the teacher to figure which one or which combination it is. As soon as you start to believe that that's not it, and that these are bad kids, it's time to reconsider your path.

This wisdom became the foundation of my interactions with students during my eight-year teaching tenure, influencing not only my teaching methods but also forging lasting connections with my students, many of whom became friends.

Amidst the challenges of teaching, a new opportunity arose: mentoring student teachers. I only had a few years of teaching under my belt when I was asked. I didn't believe that I was ready. Two of my mentors at the time were both sure that I was. Anna Marie Nucci, who was my assigned mentor in the school district explained that she recommended me for the role because I was doing innovative things in the classroom and that many of the students responded positively to my style. When I reached out to another mentor, Virginia Perry with whom I worked with in my first teaching assignment, she challenged me to accept the responsibility. Mrs. Perry assured me that a student teacher would force me to reflect on my own practice and that it would give me a chance to assess my skills as a teacher. Mrs. Perry introduced a new

concept to me that resonated so strongly that I put it into practice. She told me that I need to have the confidence to fail if I am going to achieve my goals.

The confidence to fail.

Without the confidence to fail, you won't have the confidence to succeed. Avoiding failure is avoiding testing your limits. It's avoiding growth. It's avoiding challenges. We embrace the confidence to fail with the knowledge that failure begets success, by providing an opportunity to correct oneself. Failure presents the opportunity to analyze and understand our mistakes and shortcomings so that we may perform better.

Mrs. Perry's notion of owning the "confidence to fail" became a guiding principle, shaping my approach to both teaching and mentorship.

With their confidence in me and just five years of teaching experience, I embraced the responsibility of guiding a student. This experience was a profound shift, forcing me to reflect on my own practices and share the insights I had garnered. You don't have to be a master to be a teacher. You only need a willingness to share experiences and to offer others an opportunity to align their growth and exploration with yours.

Upon leaving the traditional classroom, I carried these experiences into new roles and opportunities to mentor young individuals. The encounter at the Amtrak station and the challenge of mentoring revealed a gap in my experiences—a gap that bridged my time as a mentee to becoming a mentor myself.

In this juncture, the dual perspectives of being guided and guiding others became apparent. The lessons from my mentor at the train station and the challenges of mentoring a novice teacher shaped not only my teaching philosophy but also my role as a mentor in various capacities.

These experiences underscored the importance of continuous learning, empathy, and the willingness to embrace the responsibility of guiding others through the complexities of their journeys. In navigating this distinct gap in my mentorship journey, I've come to appreciate the cyclical nature of learning and growth, where the mentee is groomed to become the mentor, perpetuating a legacy of shared wisdom and empowerment.

While the narrative above provides a glimpse into my journey of understanding the role and value of mentors, it only scratches the surface of developing a comprehensive Restorative Model of Mentoring for Black Community Growth. Unlike conventional models derived from research studies or best practices, my model evolved organically, starting with my work with high school students in the mid-1990s and continuing through subsequent working relationships.

In the past year, my commitment to comprehending the effectiveness of my mentorship led me to engage dozens of my mentees and mentors to develop a theory of mentorship. A key revelation was the importance of situating the mentee within a higher purpose. We emphasize the collective potential to achieve greatness and contribute significantly when our efforts are framed within the context of supporting others' success. This departure from individual-centric models sets our approach apart.

Understanding the operating context is crucial. Our actions unfold within the aftermath of over 500 years of global capitalism, a system rooted in extraction and exploitation. The African American experience, involuntary and bereft of cultural continuity, contrasts sharply with the experiences of those who immigrated voluntarily or have intact cultural heritages. For example, Chinese Americans and American Chinese, despite facing discrimination, possess a sense of purpose and continuity rooted in a rich history dating back thousands of years.

Conversely, the African American and American African experience is marked by centuries of forced migration and the destruction of cultural, political, and economic institutions. Colonialism severed the continuity of identity with Africans and African Americans, destroying traditions and customs. This disruption is especially evident in the absence of structured rites of passage, such as the Rite of Adulthood prevalent in many African societies.

In African cultures, initiation rituals for adulthood are meticulously structured, providing moral instruction, clarifying social responsibilities, and instilling a profound understanding of one's life mission. The communal nature of these ceremonies fosters a strong sense of identity and belonging.

On the contrary, in the US and Western societies, there is a dearth of systematic guidance for young individuals transitioning into adulthood. The conventional view of adulthood as a status achieved at a specific age lacks a formalized process, leading to confusion and uncertainty, particularly among Black youth who may lack the privileges and access granted to their white, Asian, or Latino counterparts.

Most of my mentoring relationships, whether as a mentee or mentor, have naturally been informal—an aspect that is less than ideal but indicative of the limited prevalence of formal mentorship programs in Western society. Recognizing this gap, I offer guidance to those I mentor, advising them to maintain at least three mentors: one in their field or profession, another sharing similar values and goals, and a third to ground them in humanity. I also stress the importance of reciprocity, urging mentees to become mentors themselves, fostering a symbiotic relationship that emphasizes the significance of reaching back to move forward.

Investing in Black youth and students through mentorship programs is more than an ethical imperative—it is a fundamental step toward dismantling systemic barriers and unlocking untapped potential within the Black community. This strategic investment not only addresses historical disparities in education and opportunities but also contributes to overall social and economic well-being.

Upon reflection, I engaged dozens within my mentoring network to collaboratively create a formal mentoring system. We distilled the effective and crucial elements of our informal model into key components for a structured approach. This initiative aims to elevate the impact of mentorship, particularly within the context of Black community growth.

To create a Restorative Model of Mentoring for Black Community Growth, we must infuse mentorship programs with cultural sensitivity, emphasize communal purpose, and recognize the unique historical and cultural context of Black youth in America. Tailoring mentorship to address these specific needs contributes to a more comprehensive and impactful approach.

Whether formal or informal, mentorship programs should guide individuals through transitions, be it from youth to adulthood or from entry-level to a more experienced role. These programs should encompass moral guidance, social responsibilities, and assistance in identifying personal goals and missions in life.

Elements of an effective mentorship program include:

Cultural Infusion

While acknowledging cultural differences, infuse mentorship programs with positive aspects inspired by rites of passage. Encourage a sense of community, belonging, and shared experiences to foster a stronger identity among mentees.

Age Transitions

Create mentorship initiatives focusing on specific age transitions, mirroring stages highlighted in African initiation ceremonies. Clearly define roles and responsibilities for each stage, guiding mentees through a structured progression towards adulthood. In professional settings, emphasize achievements or milestones such as job promotions, certificates, or degree completions.

Involvement of Experienced Mentors

Emphasize the involvement of elders, senior professionals, and experienced mentors in guiding mentees. Their wisdom and guidance play a crucial role in providing moral instruction, sharing societal norms, and helping mentees understand their evolving roles.

Holistic Guidance

Extend mentorship beyond academic milestones. Offer guidance and support as individuals navigate the complexities of adulthood, ensuring a more holistic and comprehensive mentorship approach.

Communal Experiences

Facilitate communal experiences within mentorship programs, creating opportunities for mentees to share common experiences, reinforcing a sense of community and mutual understanding.

Reflective Practices

Encourage reflective practices within mentorship, allowing mentees to undergo a transformative process as they transition to adulthood or achieve more professional roles and responsibilities. Provide spaces for mentees to explore their identities, values, and aspirations with the guidance of mentors.

In conclusion, implementing these elements in a Restorative Model of Mentoring for Black Community Growth not only addresses the existing gaps but also paves the way for a more inclusive, impactful, and culturally sensitive mentorship paradigm.