



Telemachus and Mentor from  
Homer's *The Odyssey*

By [Chip Bircher](#)

***Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others. —Jack Welch***

In the fall of 1915, a young lieutenant fresh out of West Point reported to Fort George Wright, Washington for his first assignment. He soon met Edwin Harding, an older more experienced lieutenant. Harding saw something in the new guy and invited him to join a small group he led in informal discussions of tactics, problem solving, military history, and professionalism.<sup>[1]</sup> Armed with the wisdom gleaned from a career filled with mentorship, this young leader would go on to command a division, corps, army, and army group in World War II, rise to the rank of General of the Army, and culminate his career with two tours as the first Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. While Edwin Harding would certainly not have taken credit for General Omar Nelson Bradley's success, there can be no doubt the influence mentorship had on Omar Bradley - both the relationship with Harding and his enduring mentorship under the tutelage of General George C. Marshall.

Uncertain. Complex. Ambiguous. Hybrid. We use these words almost interchangeably to describe the operational environment senior leaders face today. Try to imagine the content of the Harding-Bradley discussions framed by global connectivity, real-time media reporting, false news, digital engagement, virtual relationships - you get the picture. We expect leaders at all levels to understand this complex environment and visualize a path to success; articulate a vision that transcends strategic, operational, and tactical organizations and is understood by all team members; become skilled negotiators adept at building consensus among disparate and often competing interests; and serve as stewards of their profession - ensuring the long-term health of their organization.<sup>[2]</sup> However, it is this last point - stewardship - to which senior leaders must commit to ensure the long-term viability of our force, especially in a future characterized by ambiguity, hybrid warfare, and multiple adversaries who routinely use military power across multiple domains with impunity. By embracing mentorship, senior leaders will ensure the Army continues to grow the leaders necessary for our force to dominate the operational environment.

***But what is Mentorship, and how should an institution as large and broad as the Army approach it?***

The concept of mentorship isn't something new, the latest leadership gimmick: Homer wrote about how Odysseus left the care and upbringing of his son to Mentor, his close friend and confidant. Schools and organizations around the country have recognized the importance that mentorship can play in the development of young boys and girls, adopting everything from volunteer adult mentors to peer mentor programs. Businesses and corporations have identified mentorship as the way to continually develop competent corporate leadership. There is even a cottage industry full of mentorship coaches and experts, leadership manuals with chapters dedicated to mentorship, and mentorship websites and conferences.

As with all good ideas, the Army attempts to codify and regulate "mentorship" in Army Regulation 600-100, *Army Leadership* which defines it as "the voluntary developmental relationship that exists between a person of greater experience and a person of lesser experience that is characterized by mutual trust and respect." Army, business, and educational literature have this in common - the notion of "development" and "voluntary." A successful mentorship relationship requires both the mentor and the "protégé" to voluntarily agree to an informational exchange relationship designed to increase the knowledge, capability, capacity and potential of the protégé while contributing to the leadership capabilities and health of the organization.<sup>[3]</sup>

Fundamentally, every mentorship relationship has three critical aspects: the mentor, the

protégé, and the desired outcome. Mentors come in all shapes and sizes, from all walks of life, but they normally take one of three primary forms: superior mentors, peer mentors, and subordinate mentors. When we think of mentors in the traditional sense - the superior to subordinate relationship - an image of an older, trusted counselor comes to mind: someone like Odysseus' friend or a former Commander, someone whose opinion and advice you value, someone you trust. Peer mentors are just as important, such as the Harding-Bradley relationship or the Friday evening beer-calls with the "Lieutenant Mafia." Finding outlets in which you can share problems, explore ideas and challenge assertions - among equals without fear of retribution - is critical to individual growth. Usually overlooked, the subordinate to superior mentorship path is equally necessary. While I may have more experience in overall communication practices than many, what I have learned from younger generations (yes, plural) of leaders about digital leadership and how to communicate on preferred media is absolute gold. I'm probably paraphrasing from a famous person's quote, but the leader who thinks there is nothing to be learned from those he leads really is the fool.

***The growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership. —Harvey Firestone***

The concept of Stewardship as a desired trait for a strategic leader implies a willingness to place the needs of the organization ahead of personal needs to enable the enduring health of the organization.<sup>[4]</sup> To sustain long-term health and growth, every organization must invest in developing qualified, proficient leaders capable of steering the organization in the future. The best way to ensure this leadership need is to grow and nurture leaders for this role, and the best way to grow them is for senior leaders to not just accept but embrace the responsibility of being active, participatory mentors. Senior leaders must seek out, identify and nurture future leaders, just as Harding and Marshall did with Bradley. They must instill in these future leaders a love for the organization, a desire to lead, a thirst to learn and grow, and a desire to adopt the mantle of leadership.<sup>[5]</sup> If, as a former Chief of Staff has said, Soldiers are our credentials, then through this aspect of stewardship senior leaders will ensure our organization is sustained.

When discussing senior leaders and communication, what usually come to mind are e-mail notes, never-ending briefings, civic events, "commander's guidance," maybe even negotiations and consensus building. In order to be effective mentors, senior leaders must master a new form of communication, one that entails the ability to listen and question, the ability to be a sounding board, and the ability to give advice that is taken to heart and not

ignored. “A mentor is an advisor who looks toward the future, who dispenses wisdom that is directed toward the current but mostly the future needs of the individual.”<sup>[6]</sup> Anyone who has had the pleasure of giving advice and guidance to a teenager can appreciate the complexities involved with not just giving that advice, but, more importantly, giving the advice in a manner in which it will be taken to heart. This involves a different aspect of communication. The mentor must be accessible to the protégé, and must be able to communicate over the medium the protégé prefers. Baby Boomers and Gen Xers are comfortable with face-to-face meetings, phone calls and e-mails. Perhaps even texting now. How many senior leaders have identifiable accounts on Twitter, WhatsApp, FourSquare, Slack, blogs, Facebook, LinkedIn (the list goes on and changes every week), let alone use these platforms to actively engage younger leaders? Not for selfies and public relations fluff-pieces, but to engage and promote specific audiences in meaningful dialogue and challenge them to think. Mentors cannot adopt a pedantic, over-bearing approach to dispensing guidance. The communication must take the form of a conversation, one in which listening is just as important as talking. The Chief of Staff of the Army in 2036 (20 years from now) is a Major today. I’ll bet the first round at O-Call he or she is on these platforms now, hungry for content and engagement.

**If a mentor brings wisdom, advice, guidance, and counsel to the relationship, what does a protégé bring, and what are the responsibilities of the protégé?**

First, a protégé provides a different perspective with which to better frame the environment or problem. Too often strategic leaders become myopic – they are victims of their own experiences, beliefs, and perceptions. A protégé provides a fresh set of eyes and a different frame of reference to a complex and ambiguous world, enabling the strategic leader to better visualize the operational environment and expand his personal frame of reference. Protégés help the strategic leader broaden his ability to conduct environmental scanning of this environment.<sup>[7]</sup> Mentors must identify subordinates who have the potential to contribute to the leadership well-being of the organization and adopt these future leaders into their fold. No relationship is a one-way street; protégés have responsibilities as well. Protégés must identify leaders whom they wish to emulate, and – equally important – those they wish to avoid. Protégés have the responsibility to seek knowledge, to pursue their profession, and to expand their intellectual horizons – shared responsibilities with their mentors. Finally, protégés have the responsibility to be proactive: they cannot wait for a mentor to approach them, just as they cannot accomplish their career goals on their own. Once they have identified a potential mentor, they have the responsibility to approach the senior leader and ask for advice, assistance, or perhaps even to serve as a mentor. The senior leader has the responsibility to respond, and to follow through on the commitment.<sup>[8]</sup>

These relational responsibilities are based on a foundation of trust, administered by effective two-way communication.

Consider the mentorship function embedded in Army Career Tracker (ACT) and the now-defunct mentorship forums on AKO: there is probably a good reason they are *#epicfails*. In its zeal to institutionalize a valuable concept, the Army forgot several cardinal rules about mentorship. Mentorship is based first and foremost on mutual trust: it is not solely career counseling, even though that is how the relationship may begin. It is a give-and-take relationship in which advice, guidance and even camaraderie are shared in a confidential manner, based on trust. Secondly, mentorship is best accomplished as a voluntary, informal relationship - not a Headquarters, Department of the Army managed program. Protégés must understand and accept that mentorship is not a form of patronage: the purpose of the mentor relationship is to gain a trusted advisor, not to tie a career to someone's coat-tails. Finally, and this is the hardest part: like all relationships, mentorship takes time and effort from both parties.

***I start with the premise that the function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers. —Ralph Nader***

If stewardship of our profession really is important, and I happen to believe it is, then mentorship is a strategic imperative. Mentorship isn't easy, but the return on investment is absolutely crucial to the long-term health of our profession. Educational programs like the Senior Service Colleges, the Pre-Command Course, and CAPSTONE must educate senior leaders on the principles, the purpose, the value, and the best practices of mentorship. Senior leaders must accept the responsibility to engage with and develop young officers and non-commissioned officers - in the format they prefer. Protégés must seek out and maintain the relationships they need and engage in constructive dialogue. As one senior leader put it, "Why does mentorship have to be a formal process? Being a senior leader is about finding a way to give back."<sup>[9]</sup>

*Colonel Chip Bircher (@chip\_bircher) is the Director of the U.S. Army Information Operations Proponent at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Over the course of his career he has had the good fortune to learn from a diverse group of mentors and hopefully serve as a mentor to others along the way. The views expressed are his alone and do not represent Army or Department of Defense official positions.*

<sup>[1]</sup> Kirkpatrick, Charles. "The Centennial: Omar Nelson Bradley." U.S. Army Center of Military History. <http://www.history.army.mil/brochures/bradley/bradley.htm> (accessed October 17, 2011).

[2] Stephen, Gerras. *Strategic Leadership Primer, 3rd Edition*. Carlisle Barracks, PA: United States Army War College, 2010.

[3] Johson, W. Brad and Gene Andersen. "Formal Mentoring in the Military: Research Evidence, Lingering Questions, and Recommendations." *Naval War COLlege Review* 63 (2010),  
<http://www.usnwc.edu/getattachment/1d75c515-7093-4bc3-92fa-7284b7198bb4/Formal-Mentoring-in-the-U-S-Military-Research-Ev> (accessed October 18, 2011).

[4] Gerras, pg. 7.

[5] Reh, F. John. "Mentors and Mentoring: Being a Mentor." Free Management Library.  
<http://management.about.com/cs/people/a/BeingMentor.htm> (accessed October 18, 2011).

[6] Baldoni, John. *Great Communication Secrets of Great Leaders*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003. (accessed October 18, 2011).

[7] Gerras, pg. 10.

[8] U.S. Department of the Army, *Army Leadership*, Field Manual 6-22 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Army, October 12, 2006), 8-15.

[9] MG Stephen Lanza, "Anton Myrer Leadership Day," Carlisle Barracks, PA, U.S. Army War College, October 18, 2011.

## Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Tweet](#)
- 
- [Print](#)
- [WhatsApp](#)