



by Aaron W. Childers

When most people choose a profession, they spend some time looking at their strengths (and weaknesses) and how their personality best fits into that chosen profession. For example, you may find your gregarious nature is a great fit for sales, or your inclination towards physical fitness nests well into the demands of military service. Even in the most ideal circumstance, in which your chosen profession is closely aligned with your natural interests and talents, there are still some skills that require intentionality and practice. This is the difference between playing baseball recreationally and being an elite professional athlete. Some skills are so critical to the profession that they require regular attention, even if they come naturally. Mentorship is one of these skills; to truly be mastered it must become a disciplined and habitual process.

I used to take mentoring for granted. I liked staying in touch with people, so why would I need to work at it? Keeping contact with friends and mentors from duty stations past came naturally to me. I even considered being intentional about maintaining contact a counterintuitive idea. After all, these were people I enjoyed interacting with. Why would I need to practice this or make it a discipline? However, I learned by not putting an emphasis on mentoring as a professional skill, my contact was sporadic and undisciplined. I eventually realized that mentoring is so intertwined with leader development, it must be ingrained as an intentional habit.

A simple, but elegant way to build this intentionality is through habit tracking. I know what you're thinking, the last thing you need in your life is another tracker or product. However, the utility of this exercise is in the thoughtful construction of the product. James Clear, in his book [Atomic Habits](#), discusses how habit tracking is key to developing lifelong habits and why it works so well. First, a tracker makes the habit obvious, giving you a visual clue to remind you of the habit. Second, a tracker makes the habit attractive. When you see your progress, you are encouraged to continue the habit. This provides you with "[visual proof](#)" that you are achieving your goal. Finally, habit tracking is satisfying. If you are like me, checking something off a list gives you a little [dopamine hit](#). However, as a serial checklist maker, I know that a simple, unorganized list does not provide the focus that mentorship deserves. Creating an organized tool will ensure you are both intentional and balanced in the way you mentor and receive mentorship.

Building Your Mentorship Tracker

Spending quality time designing your own personal mentorship tracker will pay dividends. For me, developing a tracker that reflected a balanced approach to mentorship was important. I wanted to ensure those who I received mentorship from and those who I mentored were both well-represented. My solution was a table with three columns: 1) those

I mentor, 2) peers I admire, and 3) those I consider my mentors. If you want to take it a step further, you can put a column for the last time you interacted, or a column for a checkbox if you need that dopamine kick discussed earlier.

Don't feel like you have to arrange your tracker this way. You can arrange by people (if you have a preferential sequence for contacting people), or arrange by subject (think about spiritual mentors, parenting mentors, financial mentors, etc).

My Mentorship Tracker					
Those I Mentor		Peers I Admire		Mentors	
Name	Date Last Contacted	Name	Date Last Contacted	Name	Date Last Contacted

Filling Your Mentorship Tracker

Take your time. If you put too many people on the tracker, it will become overwhelming and you won't maintain the habit. If you are having trouble filling some of the columns, do some self-examination, especially when it comes to those you mentor.

As you build your mentorship list, ensure there are a variety of perspectives and backgrounds. Receiving mentorship from beyond your specialty is key, so think about how to improve all aspects of your life. Just like a good reading list or a healthy diet, you should seek well-balanced advice from your mentors. Consider your faith and spirituality, possibly adding a pastor or spiritual advisor. Think about your family - maybe you know an experienced parent or a couple with an incredible marriage that you can add to your list. Seek out diverse perspectives. Consider having someone younger than you or someone from

a totally different profession on your list. Take your time building this part of the list, but remember that this is a living document and can change. It's alright to have mentors for specific phases of your life; not all mentors are permanent. You can add to and delete from the tracker however you see fit.

After you fill out the "mentors" part of your list, look at your peers and ask yourself, "Who have I worked with that I admire?" Maybe one of your peers has a specific skill set or quality that you admire and want to nurture in your own self-development. Maybe someone is gifted at a particular facet within your profession, like planning or writing. If you want to add these details to your list, try putting their skill next to their name. Don't neglect this part of your tracker. In some situations, you may be more likely to reach out to a peer for assistance, rather than a senior or subordinate.

The most important step for me was looking at who I was mentoring. I wanted to be thoughtful and intentional about how I was giving back to my profession. You do not have to consider the people on this list protégés. The best mentoring relationships usually do not start with a formal "will you be my mentor?" They more often originate through professional and continuous contact - you are most likely already in contact with the people on this list. Additionally, don't think that you are too young to start populating this list. If you are a Second Lieutenant, you are probably in contact with someone who is still a cadet. If you are a junior Non-Commissioned Officer, you probably still talk to your Soldiers. You are never too young to mentor someone.

Once your list is complete, take some time to review. Ask the following questions:

- Do you have a variety of people from different backgrounds and perspectives on your list? Echo chamber advice is not good advice; always seek differing opinions.
- Is your list balanced? Is it too professional? Does it focus enough on other aspects of life?

- Are you lacking peers to solicit advice from?
- Is there someone younger than you that you consider a mentor?

Finally, make notes about key events happening in these individuals lives (deployment, new baby, etc.). At the end of the day, mentorship is about relationships. Be invested in the details of those people you mentor.

Follow Your Tracker

Example Mentorship Tracker					
Those I Mentor		Peers Who I Admire		Mentors	
Name	Date Last Contacted	Name	Date Last Contacted	Name	Date Last Contacted
CDT Alfred Einstein (Branching Infantry)	January	LTC Johnson (Planning)	May	COL Smith (Leadership)	February
LT King (Deployed)	March	MAJ Carter (Communication)	Dec	Mr. Davis (Parenting)	July
CPT Doe (New child)	May			Pastor Mark (Faith)	September
				Ms. Parker (Finance)	October

Set up an achievable method to maintain your mentoring habit. The list is worthless if you do not follow it. I once knew a leader who created a weekly time on her calendar for mentoring. She had a day and time dedicated to reaching out to mentors, peers, and those she mentored. By creating a visual cue and dedicating space on her calendar, she deliberately allocated time to doing something that was important to her.

Don't feel like the act of mentoring needs to be burdensome. You don't need to send overly

complicated emails to keep in touch with mentors and mentees. A simple email is great: “Just checking in. How are things?” The act of sending the quick email and asking a simple question is enough to keep dialogue going. Plus, you never know what response you might get. Most people, whether junior or senior, enjoy just knowing that you are thinking about them.

Sustaining the Habit

Remember, the goal here is to make mentoring a habit. Feel free to adapt this tracker and associated habit to whatever works best for you; its purpose is to help you develop. If the habit becomes burdensome or painful, change it up. There may be utility in just making the list in your green notebook once. Or, using the tracker may quickly become a weekly or even daily regimen. Do what is best to build a good habit that is sustainable over time. Be intentional and make mentoring a habit you keep.

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