Navigating Through Pri

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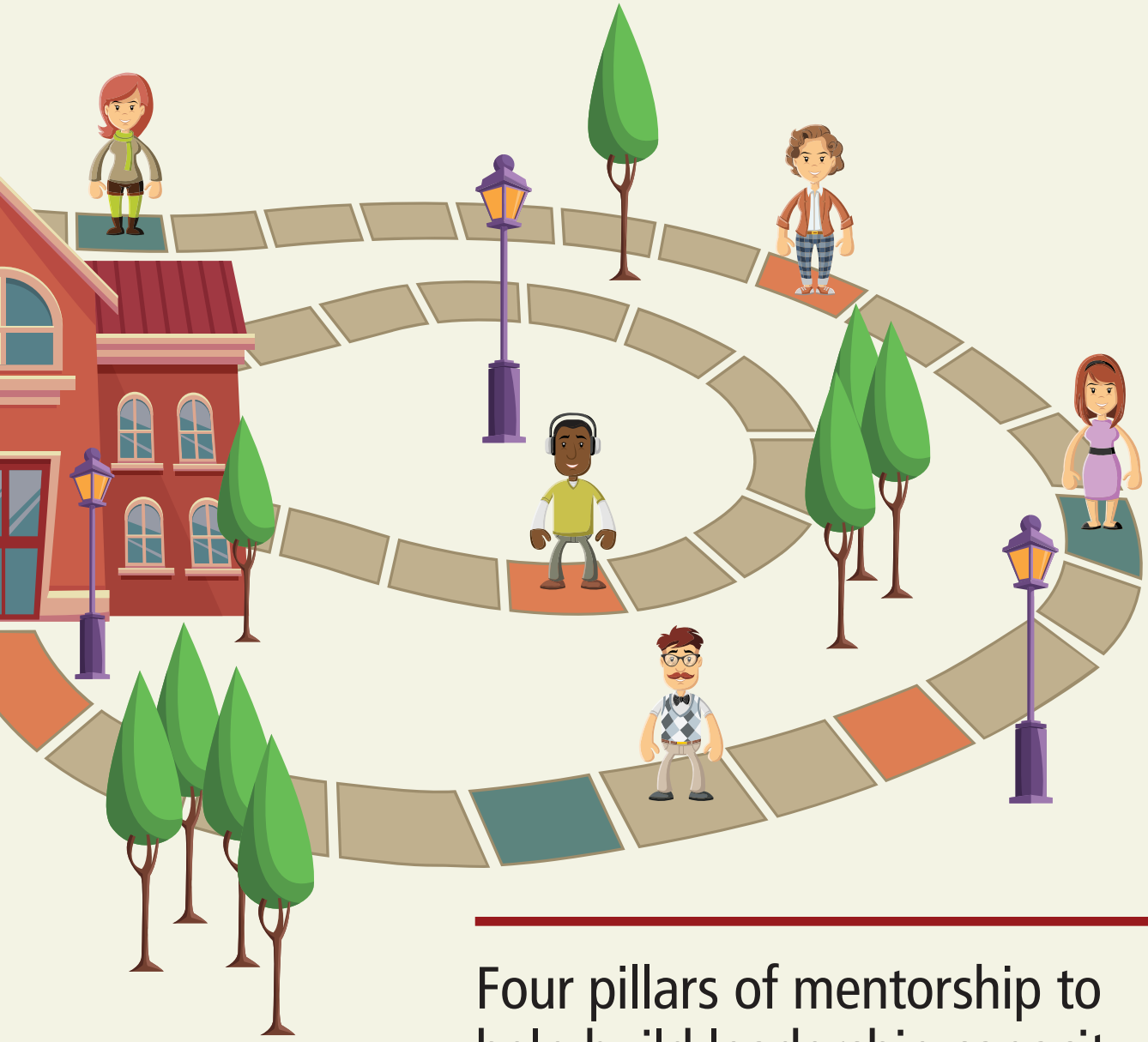

Four pillars of mentorship to help build leadership capacity

By Monique D. Lamar

July 1, 2010: My first day at Calverton Elementary School as a first-year principal. I had a well-planned strategic vision for academic student excellence, and knew I was fully capable of leading a learning organization. I had several years as an assistant principal under my belt, and I was ready for my building to SOAR!

September 2010: Reality sets in. Faced with the task of being an instructional leader, a budget analyst, a human resources officer, a public relations specialist, a business manager, a maintenance supervisor, a contract specialist, an oracle, and a whole host of other things conveniently hidden under the "other duties as assigned" bullet point, I realized I needed help. My vision of the principalship and my reality didn't align. I needed someone—anyone—to help me navigate through "Principal Land."

Enter Melissa, my NAESP-certified principal mentor. She was the principal of a very large and high-performing English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) school. She was my guide and my counsel. She made herself available to listen, probe, and offer guidance. She jumped in, rolled up her sleeves, and helped me grow professionally. I will forever be grateful for her help and support.

Mentoring, Defined

I am now in my eighth year as a principal, and I have been given the opportunity to serve my district as an NAESP-certified principal mentor. To date, I have served as a mentor to approximately eight other principals within my district. I approach each mentee with the same thought in mind: *How can I guide and counsel them through their first year in "Principal Land"?*

I believe mentoring is an intentional relationship created to help and develop novice leaders. This relationship helps to build competency in individuals, decrease stress, and model expected leadership behaviors. Most importantly, this relationship is nonevaluative and nonthreatening. The sole focus of this relationship is to build the capacity of the novice leader. When mentoring is done well, the relationship is beneficial to both parties.

In my district, the matching of mentor to mentee is facilitated through the Office of Talent Development, and systems and structures have been designed to facilitate this relationship. Although I do not directly participate in the selection of my mentee, I am solely responsible for nurturing and fostering this relationship. Although my mentees and I are afforded the opportunity to meet monthly through meetings facilitated by the district, I also work hard at creating opportunities to meet informally with my mentees. I am also intentional in my efforts to communicate with my mentee consistently.

As principals, we also serve as mentors to the teacher-leaders in our buildings. The mark of an effective leader is the ability to train future leaders in education. I believe that some individuals have been gifted with the innate ability to coach, mentor, and develop people within their organization. This natural ability is the exception to the rule. For most people, mentoring is a skill that can be learned, developed, and refined over time. Once developed, mentoring skills can be applied across multiple contexts to create a high-performing leadership team, effective assistant principals, and competent principals.

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The secret to my success as a mentor is that I utilize the same approach to mentoring whether I am working with one of my colleagues or one of my teacher leaders. Initially, establishing an effective mentor-mentee relationship is not always easy. Overcoming barriers to trust and communication is paramount. My first inclination when approaching a relationship is to determine my protégé's communication style preference. I adjust my communication style to meet my protégé's. I understand that establishing a trusting relationship takes time and effort. Therefore, when working with my protégé, I focus on what I call the "four pillars of mentoring": trust-building, asking the right questions, being a resource, and being present.

Pillar 1: Trust-Building

My first objective when establishing a newly minted mentoring relationship is to build trust, which Webster's dictionary defines as *firm belief in the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something*.

Trust is created by my ability to be open and honest about my past successes and failures. I do not pretend to be perfect, nor do I pretend to have all the answers. I keep my judgments at the door, so my mentees feel comfortable enough to share themselves with me.

I also spend time getting to know my mentees as individuals. I learn their likes and dislikes, discuss their short-term and long-term goals, and learn their work-style preferences as well as other pertinent information regarding their leadership strengths. I use this information to tailor my approach when working with my mentees.

Once trust is established, I work extremely hard to maintain and nurture this relationship.

Pillar 2: Asking the Right Questions

Taking an "inquiry stance" when working with your mentee yields big wins.

As a mentor, you have to sharpen your listening skills and ask the right questions in order to help your mentee arrive at solutions. It is very easy to *tell* your mentee what they need to do from your perspective; however, it is their school, and they need to make the decisions.

My role as a skilled mentor is to ask questions that yield information about the situation. I ensure my questions are open-ended so we can have discourse around the situation or scenario. I also ask questions that will advance my mentees' knowledge. Questions should stretch their thinking and help them arrive at the root of problems.

Asking the right questions helps to solidify trust because the mentees know their thinking will be challenged to help support, motivate, and encourage growth.

Pillar 3: Being a Resource

Serving as a resource to your mentee also helps to establish and build leadership capacity.

As a resource, I talk with mentees about the nuances of the job that are not covered during systemic or grade-level meetings. I also share my personal experiences as a leader; we discuss how I was able to successfully—or not-so-successfully—navigate many different situations. I point my mentees to a wide array of documents, books, professional development opportunities, and strategies to assist in their leadership journey.

Your mentees should know that if they disclose a challenge to you, you will question them to uncover opportunities and threats, and then provide resources to help them grow.

Pillar 4: Being Present

The last pillar is built around being consistent and reliable. If your mentee calls, you should make yourself available to provide support.

Being present also means being focused and fully engaged when you are together. You must be willing to disconnect from whatever you are doing to provide a listening and supportive ear. You must commit to answering late night and early morning phone calls. You must also be willing to answer emails in a timely fashion.

One's inability to be present can cause a breakdown in the mentor-mentee relationship. The last thing you want is for your mentee to feel as if you are unavailable. They may begin to question your reliability as a resource, your sincerity, and your willingness to help them make short- and long-term changes. Your primary role as a mentor is to be present for your mentee.

Mentoring is a rewarding and fulfilling experience for both parties when it is approached in a purposeful and strategic way. My role as a mentor helped me to become a more effective leader. I now take an inquiry stance with my teachers during our formal and informal conversation; this approach has allowed me to help them identify strengths and weaknesses in their practices and to create possible solutions and strategies to implement in their classrooms. I have also established norms within our building to ensure that we are fully engaged and present during staff and content meetings. We consistently work on developing relationships with the teachers, and I spend time building and maintaining trusting relationships within my building.

I remember how it felt to be a novice, and I also remember the relief I felt when I was able to call my mentor for help and support. It is my goal to always be that relief for someone. P

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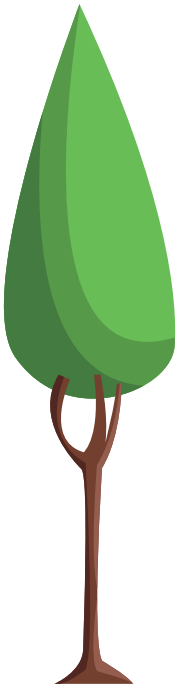

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