



NORTHEAST OHIO APARTMENT ASSOCIATION

The Mentor-Mentee Relationship: Taking career development into your own hands

Fred Rzepka has been in the apartment business for 60 years and counting. That's enough wisdom to fill a shelf of textbooks, if he ever had the inclination to write them.

Instead, Rzepka, 81, president of Owners Management Co. in Bedford Heights, is conveying that lifetime of knowhow to Jeff Breha, who he hired just over a year ago as vice president of operations to oversee the firm's 4,000 managed units.

To Breha, Rzepka is more than a boss. He's also his mentor.

"The short time that I have been part of Owners Management Co.," Breha says, "he has helped me grow professionally, and also as a person, exponentially."

Their mentor-mentee relationship is informal. There are no structured lessons, per se. Rzepka isn't one to sit the student down and play professor, choosing to offer advice through his experiences and stories.



“It’s a passing on of knowledge,” says Rzepka. “I do not believe in lecturing. He’s learning what I know. If that’s mentoring, so be it.”

Mentoring has been a vital part of business success since before the Middle Ages, when apprentices learned their trades from the masters. The practice can be such a valuable career development tool — one that drives an enterprise in so many ways — that seven in 10 Fortune 500 companies are said to have formal mentoring programs in place.

Of course, many companies don’t, which leaves hungry, ambitious employees to seek out mentors on their own. Or be born into them.

Bob Haycox, managing member of RTR Commercial, LLC in Medina, explains that his first mentor was his father, Howard, who encouraged him to buy his first two properties when he was just 24 years old. His father also provided a much-needed seasoned voice of reason when he most needed one.

In particular, his mentor helped him work through rookie mistakes, such as not properly screening prospective tenants. Haycox wasn’t checking a prospect’s credit, criminal background, driving record and previous evictions, as he should have. He also didn’t verify their employment or obtain landlord references.

“In the early days, when I made mistakes and seriously thought about selling my properties, he helped me work through my issues and convinced me to hold my properties and that my luck would improve,” he says.

It did. Once he started contacting references and using a credit screening company, many of his previous tenant problems were eliminated. Eventually, those two properties grew to 41.

“I am very glad I listened to him,” Haycox says.

Mentoring, in fact, is all about listening. And asking questions. And identifying your shortcomings, which is where the mentor’s knowledge and experience — probably learned from the inevitable mistakes any risk-taker makes — can help fill the gaps.

“What makes a good mentee?” says Marty Cohen, principal of H&M Management. “Two things: You have to have ambition, and you must be willing to admit you don’t know everything and want to learn.”

Just as Cohen learned the business from his father, as his father did from his father the generation before. Cohen still follows the general set of



rules handed down, including, “Listen very carefully to everyone and assume that everyone in the room is smarter than you.”

Claudia Madden, director of operations for UGP Properties LLC in Cleveland, says she thought she knew everything as a young property manager in the mid- to late-1960s — until she began working for Associated Estates and a man named Lee Cohen, who was director of operations.

Cohen, she recalls, was a no-nonsense executive with an uncanny ability

to build a committed, loyal team of property managers, maintenance staff and leasing specialists because he sought and respected their opinions.

“Lee taught me many things,” she says. “That, in a team, one person is not more important than another. He taught me the meaning of integrity and respect. He taught me to play hard with your vendors but be fair, and to follow company policies, but take off the blinders and adjust to situations as circumstances dictate.”

A mentoring relationship is successful

only when the mentee is receptive to criticism and willing to adjust to suggestions, and only when the mentor is encouraged to offer unbiased, honest feedback.

“I would suggest,” Breha says, “finding a mentor who is trustworthy and does not have large gaps between their word and deed.”

And sometimes they just find you.

Joy Anzalone, now executive vice president and chief operating officer of Burton Carol Management LLC in

How to Find a Mentor

- By networking, for one. In the natural course of meeting professional contacts, you will undoubtedly meet seasoned, successful business people. Be sure to follow up those introductions.
- Attend industry trade association events as part of your networking strategy. The value of your Northeast Ohio Apartment Association membership can be further enhanced through mentoring connections.
- Professional development organizations are another good place to start, such as your local chapter of SCORE (once known as Service Corps of Retired Executives). The organization is exactly as it sounds — retired executives who volunteer their time and expertise to offer free mentoring services.
- As awkward and uncomfortable as it might sound, approach an experienced, successful practitioner. Tactfully express how much you admire their work and how they do business and simply ask if it’s possible to arrange a way to learn from them. A request to meet briefly over coffee to discuss what you have in mind is reasonable. Then maybe start by asking for input on a specific business situation and go from there.
- Consider seeking a mentor from a different industry for advice on such general, nonbusiness-specific topics as managing people, finance, leadership, business planning, etc.

Warrensville Heights, was literally picking up trash from a ravine in front of one of the company's properties when she met the man who eventually became her mentor.

Bill Risman, the company's owner, pulled up to where she was working, got out of his car in the rain and walked down the gully to shake Anzalone's hand and thank her for her hard work. She was floored.

"I could not wait until my next chance meeting with this man," she says. "He had a way of making someone feel so

important, and as a housekeeper at the time, that meant the world to me.

I remember thinking as I was working my way up the ladder that if I ever had the opportunity to motivate and inspire someone the way Bill did me, I would need to do just that "

And as she rose up the ladder, Risman took her under his wing. She got to watch and learn from him in negotiations, closing multi-million-dollar deals and running the business.

She also saw him treating people "like they were the most important person in the world," regardless of their

position in the company.

"I learned from Bill how to be a bottom-line manager, but also how to be firm but fair and how to lead by example," she says. "I also learned how to mentor people to give back to those who have been loyal and hardworking, the way Bill mentored me." 🙏

My Five (Plus five more)

Marty Cohen, principal of H&M Management, says his first and most important mentor was his father, whose general rules he still follows:

- 1** No one will watch your money and investments more than you, so don't trust anyone else to do so.
- 2** Don't be afraid to make mistakes or to admit when you do.
- 3** Listen very carefully to everyone and assume that everyone in the room is smarter than you.
- 4** Assume that all facts presented are not true, then verify them. Once you have reviewed all the facts, then you will know who was the smartest person in the room.
- 5** After listening and verifying all the facts, trust your instincts.
- 6** The words, "I can't," do not exist.
- 7** Perform the apartment repairs and operate your business for the long-term, not short term fixes.
- 8** Surround yourself with people who have a different skill set and expertise than your own.
- 9** Constantly look for ways to improve and upgrade your investments.
- 10** Anticipate vacancies, and accept that there will always be unanticipated expenses.