

Mentoring Young PR Practitioners of Color

By Lori George Billingsley

Helping to shape the future leaders of an increasingly diverse profession

I have always been an advocate for mentoring. My mentor of 18 years, Debra A. Miller, Ed.D., APR, Fellow PRSA, has been instrumental in helping me secure all of the PR jobs I have held. Clearly, I am sold on mentoring - but what about you? Helping navigate people through their career and other areas of their lives gives you a great sense of satisfaction. So, who have you mentored lately?

With the profession becoming more diverse, now more than ever PR pros need to be mentoring young professionals of color so they can be positioned to take leadership roles in the industry, their companies and communities.

"Mentoring young professionals of color is a privilege and a responsibility - especially when you are a person of color," says Antonio Tijerino, president and CEO of the Hispanic Heritage Awards Foundation, which identifies Latino leaders through its Youth Awards program and puts them in a position to lead through their LOFT (Latinos on Fast Track) initiative.

"I work with the most gifted, motivated, overachieving young people in America and they are still lost in terms of career goals and how to get there," he says. "But altruism shouldn't be the only motivation for mentoring; bottom-line business and investment should be. It is critical to mentor young people of color when the Labor Department found two-thirds of the overall work force growth in America over the next 15 years will be Latino and less than 1 percent of that growth will be in management. We clearly need to make a concerted effort to put our future leaders in a position to lead - especially in the work force."

So how do mentors make a difference?

Mentors can provide guidance for specific jobs or for overall career choices, according to Ellen Hartman, APR, Fellow PRSA, president, Weber Shandwick Atlanta. She says they can also recognize a protégé's work and put him or her in touch with the appropriate people when a suitable opportunity arises, thus quickening the promotion process. "What is surprising is that many mentors can learn so much from the protégés. It is a two-way street of learning and enlightenment. Mentoring should be an interactive process. And you don't need to be a person of color to mentor a young professional of color. What counts is that you are both willing to really open up and share your experiences," she says.

Alicia Thompson, director of communications at Popeyes Chicken & Biscuits, says "there is no better feeling than having a young person say, 'You have really helped me gain some clarity around my passion and how I plan to pursue it.'"

Her advice on locating a mentor or protégé is to find several - both within your discipline and outside for a fresh perspective - who are both like and unlike yourself in terms of gender, background, etc.

For many, graduating from being a protégé to a mentor is a natural progression. I have had the opportunity to mentor several young professionals of color over the years and it is always a wonderful

feeling when they excel in their chosen areas. Knowing that I had a hand in their success made it worth the time and effort. I still maintain professional as well as personal relationships with my mentees. Vince King Jr., deputy director, 49th Fighter Wing Public Affairs, United States Air Force, who has had several mentors, including Dr. Rochelle Ford, APR, Howard University, says that "the advice, counsel and guidance they have all provided me was astounding . . . I still keep in contact with many of them and now see myself becoming a mentor to those I work with and know."

It is not always incumbent upon the mentor to begin the relationship. On the protégé side, Kenrya Malikh Rankin, editorial assistant at Reader's Digest, recommends a multistep process for finding a mentor:

- Be proactive. "If you're at a meeting or event and the speaker has interests similar to yours, introduce yourself and get her contact information," she says.
- Be on top of your game. No one will vouch for someone who isn't good at what they do.
- Be appreciative. No one wants to help someone who just takes and never shows thanks for the help they are given. Does your mentor need help preparing for class? Volunteer. Did he just help land you a job? Take him to lunch.

Give back. Take the lessons you've been taught and pass them on to others by becoming a mentor. Debra Miller stresses that PR practitioners need to make a commitment to the PR profession and mentor others. "It is our responsibility to populate the profession with its next generation of leaders who are knowledgeable, versatile and who understand and welcome diversity and know how to perform public relations in a diverse marketplace and workplace," she says.

Miller has always said to me that the greatest contribution to the profession you make should be someone else you have mentored.

So, how do you get started?

Begin where you are. Look within your current organization or check with your local PRSA Chapter to see if there is a mentoring program in place or if they have a special young professionals or diversity special interest group. If not, check into your local PRSSA Chapter or local colleges and universities with communications/PR departments that are goldmines for young professionals.

You could be coaching the next D. Parke Gibson, a pioneer in the PR industry who was also a person of color.

Lori George Billingsley is director of issues communications at The Coca-Cola Company and chair-elect of PRSA's Multicultural Communications Professional Interest Section.