



Date : 28/08/2008

What makes a good mentor / mentee: Launching the Big Sister / Little Sister Mentorship Scheme

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Meeting: 99. Women, Information and Libraries Discussion Group
Simultaneous Interpretation: Not available

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 74TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL
10-14 August 2008, Québec, Canada
<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla74/index.htm>

The Big Sister/ Little Sister (BS/LS) idea was born last year at the IFLA Congress in Durban, at a brainstorming meeting lead by the Women Information and Libraries (WIL) conveners to establish future objectives for the Discussion Group.

The idea is to start an international mentorship scheme lead by women willing to help other women to learn their way around the IFLA structure and to develop their professional skills to their full potential. WIL DG conveners agreed to take this idea forward and put it to you at this year's Conference.

Although the original idea was suggested by colleagues from developing countries, the BS/LS scheme does not intend to be for professionals in developed countries to mentor professionals in developing countries or vice versa, but for all to be part of a multi-cultural, cross-sectoral mentorship scheme where women professionals from all over the world would contribute their time and knowledge.

For the BS/LS mentorship scheme to take off, we need your involvement; we need both mentees and mentors willing to add their names to the mentorship database which will be created in the new IFLA website, and maintained by members of WIL

DG who would act as coordinators, responsible for setting up some general rules, administering the BS/LS database and promoting the scheme within the IFLA community.

We see this as an organic idea that will evolve according to your needs. The fact that you are all here makes us feel positive the BS/LS idea can become a reality and benefit woman professionals all over the world. However, we can only lay the principles – it is up to you to participate to make it happen, and to give us your suggestions to develop the idea further.

What is Mentoring?

Mentoring has been around for centuries. The relationship between master and apprentice was no other than mentoring at its most productive - the experienced master would train and develop the skills of the apprentice so that these skills would be carried forward to future generations.

Although mentoring has changed considerably over the years, the concept remains the same: **skills and knowledge are passed on from one experienced individual to someone who is less experienced.**

However, although “mentoring” has been defined by many authors, there is no single definition that is applied to formal or informal schemes across the globe. This is partly because of the differentiation between the US approach and that taken in Europe or Australia.

While US mentoring schemes place more emphasis on the relationship between mentor and mentee, suggesting an emotional bond between the two, “a mixture of parent and peer”, which emphasises sponsorship and a more hand-on role, the European model encourages individuals to develop themselves; it is also more common that mentors are not necessarily higher in the hierarchy, but more experienced. As a consequence they may be peers or even juniors in some areas of expertise (i.e. IT)

The essence of mentoring not only differs from country to country, but also from sector to sector and person to person, which makes things even more complex.

A good definition for us to adopt is the one provided by British author Eric Parsloe, who states that the mentoring process is intended “**to help and support people to manage their own learning in order to help maximise their potential, develop their skills, improve their performance, and become the person they want to be**”.

According to this definition, it is the responsibility of the individual to develop their skills and competencies, using any means at their disposal. Mentoring can be one of the most productive methods of achieving professional development if the mentor and mentee relationship is appropriately managed by all those involved.

The Mentoring Relationship

As we have seen, mentoring is a process based on a relationship between two people – care needs to be taken in nurturing it as both mentor and mentee will have prior expectations which they will bring to the relationship, and the actions of each other affect the benefits that they will receive from the process.

To make the process worthwhile, both the mentor and the mentee must receive some positive outcomes; if one of them does not, then the relationship will collapse. To avoid this, both parties must manage their expectations and use the process itself (i.e. frequency and methods to communicate) to support the development of the relationship.

Benefits of Mentoring or, Why Participating in the BS/LS Mentoring Scheme?

The process of mentoring brings benefits to all those involved. Some of them, according to the National Library Board of Singapore, include:

For the Big Sister

- Personal satisfaction and recognition from her peers
- Development of personal and professional skills, such as counselling
- Incentive to keep abreast of professional developments
- Exposure to new ideas and different perspectives of the profession
- Widening of professional network
- Chance to review and validate what she knows and has accomplished
- Giving something back to the profession

For the Little Sister

- Advise on professional and personal development
- Acquisition of new skills
- Widening of network circle
- Encouragement to take up new projects and professional activities
- Insight into organisational policies
- Reduced professional isolation
- Boost of self-esteem

For the profession as a whole and IFLA in particular

- Promotion of continuous professional development
- Increased commitment from new and experienced activists
- Better understanding of organisational goals and professional issues
- Development of professional networking and support mechanisms
- Promotion of professional vision
- Leadership and succession planning

- Support of disadvantaged groups within the profession

The drawbacks should also be taken into consideration as they can endanger the success of the Scheme. Some of these include:

- Time commitment from both parts
- Those who have not experienced the benefits of mentorship may not be willing to put themselves forward as mentors
- Some potential mentors don't perceive it as an equal gain and see limited benefits for them, so we may end up with not enough Big Sisters for all the Little Sisters.
- Most professionals have not been trained to fulfil –or expect- a mentor role, which may hinder the relationship
- Mentoring perpetuates the status quo

The Roles of the Big and Little Sisters

For the mentoring relationship to work both parties should have the following attributes:

The Big Sister

- Wide range of knowledge and skills
- Experience and willingness to share her experience
- Professional commitment and integrity
- Listening and communication skills
- Ability to motivate, challenge and encourage others
- Positive outlook
- Enthusiasm
- Respect
- Patience
- Honesty
- Self-assurance
- High personal standards
- Genuine interest in – and experience of- developing others
- Ability to give and receive constructive feedback
- Sensitivity to differences: culture, race, communication style, life experiences
- Willingness to commit and find time for the relationship

The Little Sister

- Desire to work towards a professional goal
- Desire to learn and develop
- Willingness to accept different points of view and confront challenges
- Ability to ask and accept help and act upon it
- Good communication skills – including listening

- Ability to give and receive constructive feedback
- Discretion
- Honesty
- Self-awareness
- Positive attitude and enthusiasm (yet able to be realistic)
- Sensitivity to differences: culture, race, communication style, life experiences
- Willingness to work hard and go the extra mile
- Not desperate or clingy
- Not expecting the Big Sister to take over, do the work, solve the problem or provide financial support

It is also useful to spell out what the Big Sister would be usually expected to do (and do not do) for the Little Sister:

- Interpret and guide her Little Sister(s) within the wider organisation (IFLA)
- Help her Little Sister(s) to define a realistic plan of implementation for what she wants to do (present a paper, participate in a Section, get help for attendance to future Conferences, etc)
- Provide support by identifying, negotiating and removing barriers within the organisation to progress the Little Sister's objectives.
- Use these objectives as a "project" which will bring an opportunity to develop skills and knowledge in her Little Sister, following the aims of the organisation.

Practical Exercise

To help you better decide whether you would like to participate in the pilot BS/LS mentorship scheme, either as a Big Sister, a Little Sister, or both, we would like you to think for a few minutes and **write down three personal objectives (what do you want to gain) and three personal attributes (what do you think you can offer)**

(There would be post-it notes on two different colours; one for BGs, another for LSs - colours to be decided on the day). The idea is for delegates to stick to their business card and hand back to us)

Things you may want to think of to help you with the exercise are:

- Clarify what you wish to learn
- Critically evaluate if you have all the necessary attributes to make the relationship work
- Assess whether you can make the time commitment
- Clarify to yourself why are you agreeing to this relationship – what rewards do you expect to gain?

(Depending on time and number of delegates finish the session by opening up to questions and/or with volunteers reading out their post-it notes.

Finally, thank delegates for coming, and invite those interested in contributing to the WIL DG to a session the following day, Tuesday 12th at 9am in room 204ab)

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