



AIA Best Practices:

The many rewards of successful mentoring

Contributed by Ken L. Ross Jr., FAIA, FACHA

Summary

Successful mentorship involves developing a mutually beneficial relationship that enhances the professional acumen of the mentor and the mentee. At Watkins Hamilton Ross Architects, everyone was encouraged to seek a mentor or a protégé. Good mentors typically display good communication skills, approachability, forthrightness, and professionalism. Eager mentees tend to demonstrate self-worth, discipline, and a thirst for knowledge.

A culture of lifelong learning

At every stage in a professional career, one has an opportunity to mentor others or to have a mentor. A mentor may be a supervisor or a more experienced coworker who shows you the ropes on your first job. A mentor may be a professor or teacher who guides and encourages you to follow your interests. Even longtime professionals have mentors among their peers—the people they turn to for advice and information.

By its very nature, the architecture profession provides wonderful opportunities for mentoring. Young architects have long apprenticed to masters, although one can be a mentee at any stage of one's career. Frank Lloyd Wright learned from Louis Sullivan and then went on to mentor many others at Taliesin in Wisconsin and Arizona.

Charles and Ray Eames mentored many individuals in their Los Angeles design studio in the early 1960s. Every firm is a potential laboratory for mentoring relationships. Project teams create an environment that is highly conducive to the teaching of young architects by more experienced colleagues.

Sowing the seeds

Many firms have formal mentoring programs to help ensure that every employee benefits from the mentoring experience. The most successful mentoring programs are those that encourage firm partners and senior associates to seek out protégés, and young architects to seek out mentors. What tends not to work is assigning people to one another. Successful programs foster a culture of learning and knowledge sharing, beginning with senior firm management. At Watkins Hamilton Ross, we encouraged everyone—partners included—to seek out mentees. We even made it part of everyone's annual performance review.

Architecture firms of any size can enjoy the rewards of mentoring. The quality and quantity of an architecture firm's projects are directly related to the ability and willingness of its people to collectively surpass their own

expectations. Mentoring can foster that culture. An added benefit is that people who feel better about themselves and their work make a better impression on clients, who then have greater confidence in the firm's work.

Ingredients of success

Mentoring is a two-way relationship in which individuals share stories, experiences, and ideas and from which the mentor benefits as well. Watching a person learn and grow can be gratifying to a mentor. It is not unusual for a special bond to develop between a mentor and a mentee that becomes a career-long friendship.

Successful mentors have the following traits:

- **Good communication and people skills.** They have excellent interpersonal skills, and they can and do find the time to explain things in an interesting way so their shared knowledge is understood and retained.
- **Approachability.** A mentee can choose a person to be a mentor, but unless that person takes the initiative to be a good mentor, a relationship will probably not develop.
- **Forthrightness.** They deal honestly with their mentees and are willing to let them learn from their mistakes.
- **Exemplary professionalism.** They have a good work ethic and well-developed design skills.

For their part, successful mentees demonstrate the following:

- **Thirst for knowledge.** They strive to learn and to get better at what they do.
- **Self-worth and discipline.** The challenges of learning can be formidable, and expectations may be high. Self-confidence and a desire to push beyond one's current level of competence must be balanced with an understanding of the scope of knowledge yet to be learned.

Once a relationship is established, successful mentees will be open to learning new things and will be respectful of their mentors' guidance. Mentors, in turn, will be open to sharing their knowledge and career experiences freely and will take a sincere interest in their mentees' career and professional development.

You're never too old for a mentor

As you reach a senior level in your career, peer-to-peer mentoring is a good way to continue learning and developing as a professional. Peer mentors may be individuals in your firm or colleagues in the design and construction industry. Seek out peers whom you respect, who share your values, with whom you feel comfortable revealing your vulnerabilities, who have an equal or greater commitment to their careers, and who have the confidence and energy to achieve their full potential.

Choose project teammates who motivate and challenge you. Your peer mentors may be all around you—the people you already reach out to for advice and support.

About the contributor

Ken L. Ross Jr., FAIA, FACHA, was a founding principal and president of Watkins Hamilton Ross Architects, a full-service architecture and interior design firm in Houston that specialized in health care, higher education, and research facilities. Ross later served as senior vice president, Design and Practice; and senior vice president, Advocacy and Strategy, at the AIA.

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