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Who me, mentor?

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When your illustrious editors asked me to contribute a piece on mentoring for this issue, I froze, just a little bit. Is that something I do? It sounds so *adult*. After all, sitting on my desk at work was a professional journal including an article on mentoring Gen-X librarians (Bloomquist, 2014). No, mentoring was not being used as an adjective.

That gave me more pause. I'm Generation X. In 2015, being Gen-X means you have an anti-aging skin care regimen that you faithfully apply before you go out to see that indie band you discovered via Spotify.

The article talked about librarians my age leaving the field in droves because we collectively suffer from the 5-year-itch, because we distrust organizations, because career opportunities have not presented themselves as Boomers just … don't … retire. While reading this article I had some reluctant head nods of recognition: yup. The longest I've stayed in a position so far is five years. Yup, I remember taking a part-time position and being told that within a year or two, tons of full-time posts would open due to retirements. That was nine years and three libraries ago. Yup, I watched a wave of non-MLS positions replace librarian jobs, but I'm the one with organizational distrust. What this article doesn't talk about is that some of us hapless, bureaucracy-hating GenXers have become the supervisors, managers and directors that our own high school yearbook dedications warned us about. And that puts us in an odd position: while our professional literature talks about how to best mentor us, we're increasingly in positions that should lead us to mentor others. Is it any wonder this makes us collectively shudder, if not spiral into imposter syndrome?

I'm going to commit one of those sins of library science authorship that I've been on the record as decrying: 'the quick search shows' sentence. This is the sentence that begins "A search on Google shows x-number of hits for the buzz term Y," used to provide validity of concept and stated without any intended irony despite that the author is likely the same person who will make an impassioned case for Google not replacing libraries. My transgression is two-fold: I don't look to library literature to tell me about mentoring, and when I look for that articles on this topic, I look at

the tech industry. You know, those companies who are putting us out of business according to approximately 23,289 think-pieces published in the past three years.

While we are trying to get a handle on whether or not Gen-Xers are worth mentoring, Fast Company is advising Millennials how to supervise elder employees - including 'don't assume they're technologically clueless.' The magazine also tells its readers to find mentors who aren't in their company, have different backgrounds, who serve as role models rather than replicating machines. Fast Company even lists "The Librarian" as one of the kinds of mentors one should seek—sadly, they're not being MLS-literal here, but they are using our title as an indicator of someone who knows where all the hidden resources within an organization lies (Daskal, 2014; Johnston, 2015; Markman, 2015). (Still! Validation! Woot!)

Some thoughts gleaned both from my readings and my experiences:

There is a difference between supervising and mentoring, even if some of the mechanics are the same. If you're supervising library staff, you likely have a mentoring facet to your relationship with them. You are setting expectations, giving measurable goals, and helping to explore the best possible path to achieve those goals. But that does not necessarily make you their Mentor with a capital M. In supervision, you are keeping the library's outcomes as your framework for guiding staff. Professional development often happens more as a natural consequence than its own goal. If staff you supervise seek guidance and opinions from other sources in crafting their own professional skillset, that is not a threat to your role as supervisor. It's good for them, and good for your library!

Mentoring can be as formal or informal as suits your style. Mentoring can be a regular meeting over coffee with a list of goals to track and topics to discuss. Mentoring can be a helpful response to a librarian you'll never meet outside of Facebook. Mentoring can be with your peers. It is the content of the advice, not the generation gap, that makes it worthwhile.

Mentoring makes you a better librarian and supervisor. Investing your time and attention to how someone else can best meet their professional goals gives you a new perspective on what's going on in your own library.

For me, it's the emails I occasionally receive from staff who have moved on to other libraries that let me know that something I've said has made the leap from supervision to mentorship. "Hey Boss, got something to run by you," those emails begin, and nothing makes me happier. Or as happy as a Gen-X supervising librarian has the right to be. 🐾

References

Bloomquist, C. (2014). Mentoring Gen-X Librarians. Public Libraries, 53(3), 30–34. Author's note: Please note that despite my tone, Ms. Bloomquist's article is indeed well-researched and thoughtful.

Daskal, L. (2014, September 17). Ask the experts: How do I find a mentor? *Fast Company.*

Johnston, S. (2015, August 24). 7 Traits of great mentors. *Fast Company.*

Markman, A. (2015, February 25). The five types of mentors you need. *Fast Company.*