

## **MENTORING: Or how Not to Shoot Yourself in the Legacy Foot**

In August 2002 this was the gig for which I signed up:

### *WANTED*

*3 year term (NON-renewable). Director of News & Current Affairs for the world's only Aboriginal Peoples TV Network, licensed in 1999, headquartered in Winnipeg. Tasks include start up of a DAILY national Aboriginal news service and the execution of a program to mentor Aboriginal successors in management. The ideal candidate is an excellent communicator, a seasoned broadcasting executive, and has a track record as a teacher and coach.*

That job ad never appeared anywhere. But it was the plea that came from APTN, caused me to pack up after three days of "retirement" from VisionTV, and move from Toronto to Winnipeg to begin a challenging adventure.

Mentoring is the only sensible course of action in APTN's case as well as many other unacknowledged cases in our industry. It is also counter-intuitive to how most of us think of our careers. I'll deal with both of those points and also give some mentor guidelines.

### **The APTN decision to promote a culture of mentoring, especially for Aboriginal People in senior management roles, is wise.**

If the organization did not take that position, it would not be long before APTN, a network designed to be controlled and managed by Aboriginal Peoples, would be managed and controlled by others. Those others have more experience. They've had opportunity for generations. They have more resources. Those others have not been excluded from our industry. For APTN to really increase the numbers of trained, experienced Aboriginal People workers, it has to be constantly mentoring.

There is an almost standard response to "Why aren't there more women, visible minority people, Aboriginal People in your organization at every level, including the CEO and Board levels?" It is: "Because we have to wait for the guys who have seniority to retire." If this is your company's response then nothing will ever change. The guys with tenure have to actively move over, job share, bring enough workers along who are part of our diverse society to achieve critical mass. The leaders and followers of the future cannot be nurtured in an instant. Especially not in that instant when we are suddenly ready for them.

### **Yet, working ourselves out of a job goes against our natures.**

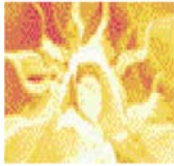
I'm a woman of colour who has been a senior manager for more than 20 years, a broadcaster for 35 years, and helped to found a television network. I've worked incredibly hard to get where I am, against tough odds. Why should I have to move over? But isn't that what we all say when it's time to share?

A group of friends in Winnipeg asked me to talk with them about mentoring. I told them the story of a well off single woman who sat down to make her last will and testament. She looked around her comfortable cottage, tried out various bequests, and finally decided she wouldn't make a will because she wanted to keep everything.

Unlike this woman, we know we can't hang on forever. What we may not be so clear about, however, is the great paradox of mentoring: What we give away, we still own.

### **Guidelines for Mentoring:**

- Know that what we freely give is still ours.
- Assist the protégé to mine their life experience, skills and biography for their work.



- Fire up your passion for the enterprise and for the work itself.
- Grow a culture of question asking and problem solving, not that it's bad to have problems and questions.
- Ask many open ended questions like: How did your day, that meeting, that conflict go?
- Teach that most problems have multiple solutions and present several growth opportunities.

**Let's confront the fears that go with succession plans:**

#1. Oh come on -- if I give my skills away, what's left for me?

answer: By lending our creativity, expertise, and knowledge, we increase the total amount that is available to us. We've added mentoring to our resumes, plus we've gained the experience of the protégé.

#2. What if I am left out in the cold?

answer: You are going to job share, consult, get to those projects you never had time for as the front line executive but are of great value to the organization. AND you are going to increase the experienced work force.

#3. What if (sob) my protégé is better at the job than me?

answer: Well, I would hope so. My Mother used to say that she expected her children and grandchildren to be smarter than she was. If not, her genes were failing!

Fear, as those of us know who've taken sensitivity training and management courses, is the basis of sexism, racism, and organizational paralysis. Think about it. If we leave a protégé who is more stupid and less effective than we are. And they leave a protégé who is more stupid and less effective than they are, in one or two working generations we'll have killed our creations, our organizations, our empires. We've shot ourselves in the legacy foot.