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5 Ways Great Mentors “Illuminate” Their Proteges



By Chip R. Bell

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Halloween was a couple of days away. My wife and I got to help our three young granddaughters carve the giant pumpkin. As soon as it was dark, we tested the luminary effect in preparation for trick-or-treating. As soon as the match lit the candle, one granddaughter exclaimed, “It’s alive! It’s magical.” To young girls, practically everything involving candles is magical! It had been illumined!

“Illumine” is an antique verb you only see in old hymnbooks. It is a powerful word with a double meaning. It means to enlighten and to light up. And it is a responsibility for every leader in today’s rapidly changing work world. As the half-life of knowledge shortens (the time between acquiring a skill and that skill becoming obsolete), leaders must continually teach, mentor, and enlighten [employees](#). But the objective is not just instruction; it is also the magic of inspiration.

Encourage discovery



Treat all learning like a fun treasure hunt. The excitement comes from learner discovery, not from learner obedience to your direction. There is an oft-quoted Confucius quote that states: “Give me a fish and I eat for a day; teach me to fish and I eat for a lifetime.” As learners, we light up like a jack-o-lantern when we are allowed to “do it ourselves.” Be an enabler of insight, not just a dispenser of information. Learners do not care how much you know until they experience how much you care; and caring means letting them show you rather than you showing them.

Author E.M. Forrester wisely wrote, “Spoon feeding, in the long run, teaches us nothing but the shape of the spoon.”

Be open and authentic

If you want learners to take risks, they must see you do likewise. Create a level playing field by acting as open and real as possible. Put your energy into acting normal, not being perfect. Did you ever notice how someone gets up to speak in front of a group, and their voice sounds “teachery”? Just talk *with* your employees, not at them. Learning is a door opened only from the inside. The rapport you create ensures an open door that welcomes in your expertise and experience. Keep learned focus on function and outcome rather than being bogged down with form and ritual. If you make errors, smile and move on. Take your content seriously, but don’t take yourself seriously. If you lighten up and have fun, so will they.



Ask before you tell.

Mentors sometimes think they must prove their expertise by having all the answers. Remember, your aim is to help your employees learn, not demonstrate your own smartness. If they discover the answer through your questions, they will remember it much longer than if you tell them the answer. Respond to their questions by saying, “I have some ideas on that, but what do *you* think?” Teach through questions, not through lectures. You are a facilitator (meaning “to make easy”), not a professor (meaning “to profess to others”)! Craft open questions that foster deep insight, not superficial regurgitation.

Steer clear of controlling gestures.



We all have keen antennae for signs of power and control that can bridle willingness to take risks. Facial expressions that communicate judgment, disapproval, or disbelief do not encourage learners to experiment and grow. Subtle nonverbal cues, such as hands on hips or a pointing finger, position you as a stern “school marm” rather than a supportive mentor. If you need to gesture, use palms up rather than a pointing finger. Controlling is a mood that is felt by the learner, not just the non-verbals they witness. Keep your tone upbeat and reassuring. Illumine is about lighting up and energizing in an uplifting fashion. It enhances what the learning can “see” (as in understand, not just observe).

Be a role model.

It is important that your behavior matches what you want your employees to learn. If, for instance, you are teaching communications, demonstrate your content through the ways you communicate. As cowboy humorist Will Rogers once said, “People learn from observation, not conversation.” If you want employees to be passionate about what they are learning, your passion will help light their path. Always make sure your message and your actions match. Learners, especially when they are new, are far more attentive to incongruence than at any time in the career. They don’t just watch your mouth for sounds; they watch your moves for signals.

Illumine your employees so they become joyful learners, not someone simply fulfilling a task. Recall people in your life who were most instrumental in promoting your learning? You probably can remember their excitement for learning and their sincere interest in you. Success comes when employees are “on fire” in their pursuit of excellence. “The mind is not a vessel that needs filling,” wrote ancient philosopher Plutarch, “but wood that needs igniting.” The employee’s quest for excellence can be fueled through the enlightenment and enthusiasm you help kindle.

About Chip Bell



Chip R. Bell is a renowned keynote speaker and the author of several award winning, international best-selling books. Global Gurus in 2026 ranked him for the twelfth year in a row in the top dozen keynote speakers in the world on customer experience. He is also a senior advisor with On3, Inc. (on3.ai), a company that specializes in mobile based, AI-driven field-based learning programs, as well as an instructor with Fuel, Inc. (myfuel.io). He can be reached at

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