



Wellness in the Workplace:  
Challenges and Opportunities for Mentorship

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# Contents

<b>Mentorship: The Core of Wellness</b>	<b>5</b>
Mentorship and Mythology . . . . .	5
Developmental Considerations . . . . .	6
Psychological Health and the Nervous System . . . . .	7
Belonging . . . . .	7
Need Fulfilment . . . . .	7
Autonomy . . . . .	7
Will and Power . . . . .	8
The Link to Addictions . . . . .	8
The Role of the Mentor . . . . .	9
Mentorship Tasks . . . . .	9
Mentorship for the Body-Mind . . . . .	9
Mentorship Goals . . . . .	10
Flight Response Mentorship . . . . .	10
Freeze Response Mentorship . . . . .	10
Orienting Response Mentorship . . . . .	10
Fight Response Mentorship . . . . .	11
A Summary: The Rule of Four . . . . .	12
Belonging . . . . .	12
Need Fulfilment . . . . .	12
Autonomy . . . . .	12
Will and Power . . . . .	13
The Shadow Carrier as Mentor . . . . .	14
Specific Scenarios: Adults 19-35 . . . . .	15
Maximizing Wellness Through Mentorship . . . . .	16
Working Through Conflicts . . . . .	18
Phase One (90 percent of all situations) . . . . .	18
Phase Two (8 percent: a bit trickier) . . . . .	19
Phase Three (2 percent: difficult scenarios) . . . . .	20
Mentorship Language . . . . .	22
Ten Statements You Should Never Say . . . . .	22

CONTENTS

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Ten Statements to Work In Whenever Possible . . . . .	22
Specific Scenarios: Self Mentorship . . . . .	23
Recommended Reading . . . . .	24
License and Use . . . . .	24
About Ross A. Laird . . . . .	25

# Mentorship: The Core of Wellness

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## Mentorship and Mythology

The word mentor is Greek in origin. It refers to a character in *The Odyssey*, a friend of Odysseus who offers counsel to his son during the father's long absence upon the sea. But the sage Mentor is actually Athena in disguise, the goddess of war and wisdom who guides and sustains Odysseus through his journey. A mentor, therefore, is a wisdom guide.

The mentors of literature are always wanderers. They have traveled, they understand the ways of the road, they have traversed their own circuitous paths in the desert. They have experience, hardscrabble wisdom, clarity, a history of grappling and reaching and searching. Of having faced up to it – whatever it is.

Adolescence is typically the most pivotal phase of a person's life, and it is the phase during which we choose our relationship to mentorship. We decide, often without recognizing it, our trajectory into the world. And how we enter is how we go on. Adolescence is the first tentative step forward, the juncture at which we establish our speed and direction and even our purpose. The character of our movement is defined. And that character is shaped by mentorship more than by any other force. The mentor might be a parent, or grandparent, or friend, or teacher, or supervisor at work, or coach – it doesn't matter much. But it must be someone whose temperament coaxes from us our better nature.

Without mentorship we become wanderers in a strange country.

The mentor's task is to witness, to trust in the spirit of healing, to offer honesty and compassion. And to offer it to the defiant, the truculent, the dismissive, the unready and the unsteady in equal measure. Nothing less.

In the oldest Egyptian tombs and temples that have been unearthed, in rooms festooned with hieroglyphics, in texts that lay undeciphered for five thousand years, one may read of an ancient god who is the bringer of knowledge and of illumination. He is the mythological ancestor of Merlin, of Gandalf, and of the many guides and mentors who populate the old tales of every culture. He is the original storyteller, the inventor of writing, the trickster and wayfinder. His name is Thoth. The Greeks called him Hermes. He illuminates the labyrinths, the lost and switchbacking tunnels, and he is keeper of the great and hidden library. Mentors today assume the storied mantle of the wayfinder.

## Developmental Considerations

Early in their lives, from about birth to age twelve, children pass through roughly seven stages of development. These stages have to do with themes such as belonging, trust, safety, empowerment, self-expression, and so on. Typically, some of these stages go well for the child whereas others are more difficult. If a given stage is difficult, the child may not fully learn the psychological tasks of that stage. For example, a child who experiences significant illness in the first year of life is more likely to feel anxiety about need fulfillment than another child who does not have the same experience. (This is because need fulfillment is the theme of roughly the first year, and problems during that year tend to impact that particular theme.)

Everyone is shaped by these developmental stages. In fact, these stages are the single most important factor in determining a person's character. This is the essential basis of modern psychology, and it's an idea supported by enough research – a mountain of research – as to be beyond dispute. Essentially, our basic character is formed by the time we are four years old. But our childhood development never unfolds perfectly. Everyone undergoes developmental themes that are less than ideal. When this happens, the child gets through the stage and moves on to the next one. The stage is left unfinished and the theme is incomplete. Children cannot afford to get stuck in one stage too long, so they leave unfinished themes behind and try to catch up with them later.

Adolescence (which now spans from about age 9 to about age 35) is the developmental phase of catching up with and resolving unfinished themes. Starting around age nine – with a process known as brain pruning – children begin to revisit the unfinished themes of their earlier development. (They do this unconsciously, but it manifests as rapid mood cycling.) Because their parents typically are too invested in the child's future and too biased toward particular outcomes, children often find that their parents are not so good at supporting them through this stage. So, children and young adults seek mentors.

A mentor is someone who can assist a child or young adult to complete their unfinished childhood themes and to further develop their character. After parenting, it is the most important role a human being can undertake (despite the low status it earns). A good mentor encourages a child to feel safe, to take appropriate risks, to express whatever remains unexpressed. Mentorship does not have to be a long-term intervention. A child can undergo a transformative experience in a single meeting with a good mentor. One outstanding experience is enough to complete the learning for an entire unfinished developmental stage.

Mentoring requires immense sensitivity and interpersonal skill. Just as a good mentor can profoundly influence a developing individual, so can a poor one. An inappropriate mentorship experience can severely damage a person's psychological development of a child. This is particularly true in the workplace, where the reason for employees leaving jobs is almost universally because of conflicts with a supervisor. Mentorship is a trust, a role that is profound and powerful; its betrayal is a therefore a profound wound.

## Psychological Health and the Nervous System

The nervous system possess habits of consciousness and action. These are developmental, and might be (somewhat arbitrarily) grouped under four themes:

- Flight Response
- Freeze Response
- Orient Response
- Fight Response

These imprints are learned in the first few years of life. They control a great deal of our behavior, emotion, and consciousness. The developmental features associated with the nervous system are among the most exhaustively researched aspects of psychology (especially with regard to trauma).

During the first four phases of childhood development, the four states of the nervous system are imprinted and tuned. This happens by way of parenting, immersion in the environment, genetic predisposition, and various other factors (some of which are still unknown).

### Belonging

Flight response is correlated with belonging (roughly from birth to one month). If an individual does not experience a sense of belonging, he or she will withdraw (psychologically and physically), and will seek ways of adapting through imagination and inner resourcing. (Cold hands and feet are one symptom of this withdrawal, as is adolescent cutting.)

In the workplace, this adaptive mechanism makes such individuals prone to emotional absence, anxiety, hallucinogen addiction, addiction to the imagination, and addiction to the technologies of fantasy.

### Need Fulfilment

Freeze response is correlated with need fulfilment (roughly one month to eight months). If an individual is abused or neglected during this period (any period, really), he or she will adapt by surrendering needs or fixating on specific needs (such as food). Surrender and fixation are two aspects of nervous system freezing. Surrender and fixation are also two aspects of depression and opiate addictions, both of which are developmentally predisposed during this period of development.

In the workplace, individuals with lingering vulnerabilities from this stage tend to develop depression, difficulties with energy, and a tendency for emotional overwhelm.

### Autonomy

The developmental stage of negotiating the relationship between self and other (which occupies the period roughly from 8 months to 1.5 years) involves significant milestones of movement, exploration, personal challenge, and orienting. If an individual does not receive balanced imprinting at this stage, he or

she will tend to become hyper-vigilant and hyperactive (not all hyperactivity is derived from this stage, however). One symptom of this adaptation is a craving for excitement and newness.

In the workplace, such individuals might adapt to stress by developing addictions to stimulants, or stimulating video games, or online gambling and the like. They might also develop problems with anxiety.

## Will and Power

Between two and four years of age, individuals negotiate their relationship to their own power. It has been well-established that domestic violence and corporal punishment at this age are highly correlated with developmental and lifespan difficulties. Such difficulties are not only psychological: the risk of adolescent and adult obesity is increased (by fifty per cent) by the experience of childhood neglect. The fight response is developed and tuned at this stage.

In the workplace, individuals with lingering vulnerability from this stage might adapt to stress by bullying or intimidating others, by becoming addicted to alcohol, or by becoming angry (all the time). They might also seek to control their psychological environment by developing an addiction to video games involving fighting.

## The Link to Addictions

Addiction involves uncompleted impulses and fractured imprinting typically derived from childhood experience (this is not universally the case, but is almost universally the case). The nature of the addiction involves the way in which the addiction completes, temporarily, the unfinished imprinting:

- ✦ Flight response addictions allow one to fly away
- ✦ Freeze response addictions enable stillness and solace
- ✦ Orienting response addictions stimulate action and exploration
- ✦ Fight response addictions enable the illusion of empowerment

The more childhood difficulty an individual experiences, the more likely the individual is to seek multiple addictions in adolescence.

## The Role of the Mentor

The only way for an individual to develop integration, containment, and identity is through mentorship. The absence of mentorship for adolescents is the most serious problem in our society today. Absence of mentorship is a primary cause of the addictions problem among both youth and adults, the suicide problem among youth, the homelessness problem in youth and adults, and the depression and anxiety problem of many people.

## Mentorship Tasks

A mentor assists another person to complete their unfinished childhood themes and to further develop their character. After parenting, it is the most important role a human being can undertake (despite the low status it earns). A good mentor encourages a child, adolescent, or adult to feel safe, to take appropriate risks, to express whatever remains unexpressed.

Mentoring requires immense sensitivity and interpersonal skill. Just as a good mentor can profoundly influence a child or adolescent, so can a poor one. An inappropriate mentorship experience can severely damage the psychological development of a child or adolescent. Adults often recover from poor mentorship experiences, but they are wounded also. Mentorship is a trust, a role that is profound and powerful.

## Mentorship for the Body-Mind

We live within a scientific context that is almost completely brain-centered. In many ways, our hyper-focus on the brain allows us to forget that the brain is only part of the larger nervous system, which in turn is part of the body-mind. Body and mind, as research consistently affirms, cannot be separated. And healthy development, of course, involves the entire body-mind.

One of the ways to simplify the immense complexities of the body-mind system is to use terminologies of the nervous system. These in turn can be grouped into mentorship roles:

- ✦ Flight response mentorship encourages trust, safety, and belonging
- ✦ Freeze response mentorship encourages need fulfillment and solace
- ✦ Orienting response mentorship encourages healthy action and exploration
- ✦ Fight response mentorship encourages healthy empowerment

Mentorship involves both physical and psychological work. The nervous system of the individual must be addressed on a physical level, through activity, as well as on an interpersonal level. In the workplace, this means finding ways to involve employees in activities that promote movement, health, and overall wellness. As much research has shown, physical activity is, by far, the most effective means of treating all kinds of psychological distress (especially depression).

## Mentorship Goals

The essential goal of mentorship is twofold: To assist individuals in completing the incomplete or fragmented nervous system imprinting from childhood, and to assist individuals in expanding their range of choice of action through recognizing and broadening nervous system habits (for example, many fighters need to learn how to freeze or flee, many freezers need to fight or flee, and many fleers need to freeze or fight.) Details for each style of nervous system habit follow below.

### Flight Response Mentorship

- + Running (to complete belonging, and to complete the flight response)
- + Competitive games (to activate the fight response)
- + Squash (orienting)
- + Soccer, frisbee, judo, aikido (safe fighting)
- + Rock climbing (self-esteem)
- + Community service and development
- + In the workplace: group inclusion

### Freeze Response Mentorship

- + Running (to unlock the flight response)
- + Martial arts (safe fighting)
- + Windsurfing (body awareness, centering)
- + Weight training (energy increase and containment)
- + Soccer, hiking, aerobics (energy management)
- + In the workplace: group conversation and personal bonding

### Orienting Response Mentorship

- + Activities involving active choosing (orienteering)
- + All team sports (collaboration)
- + Safe extreme sports (white water kayaking)
- + Meditation, relaxation, juggling
- + In the workplace: enthusiasm and connection to others

## Fight Response Mentorship

- Relaxation (to activate the freeze response)
- Non-competitive games
- Games with containment and expression (tennis, backgammon)
- Meditation (the least favorite activity of fighters)
- Horseback riding, walking, gardening Tai Chi, Chi Kung
- In the workplace: safe conflict resolution and anger management

## A Summary: The Rule of Four

### Belonging

**Theme of Belonging:** Trust, safety, community. *Do I belong in the world? Can I trust the world?* Tendency for dissociation or distance. Sometimes skittish. Typically very intelligent, but often out of touch with emotions.

**Coping Style:** Imagination, dissociation, distance. Sometimes skittish or flighty. Typically very intelligent, but often out of touch with emotions. Often socially awkward or isolating. Powerful imaginative life. Prefers imagination to actual relationship. Retreats during conflict. Nervous system habituated to flight response.

**Typical Addictions:** Hallucinogens, Entactogens, LSD, Ecstasy (MDMA), technologies of fantasy.

**Typical Mental Health Challenge:** Dissociation.

**Mentorship Requirements:** Slow, careful, and non-intrusive development of trust and safety. Nurturing of a sense of belonging in a community of caring and support. Emphasis on integrating imagination into actual work.

### Need Fulfillment

**Theme of Need Fulfillment:** Emotional nurturing and support. *Can I get my needs met? Must I do everything myself?* Tendency for collapse and depression. Sometimes overly-independent. Typically very emotionally astute and sensitive, but easily overwhelmed by emotions. Enjoys calm and safe environments. Dislikes chaos.

**Coping Style:** Seeks emotional attachment and bonding. Responds well to nurturing, but also is highly demanding of relationships. Exquisitely aware of emotional situations and energies (and, when such situations are stressful, is strongly impacted). Turns inward during conflict. Nervous system habituated to freeze response.

**Typical Addictions:** Opiates (Heroin, Methadone), Valium, GHB, Rohypnol, OxyContin, Talwin, technologies of solace and community.

**Typical Mental Health Challenge:** Depression.

**Mentorship Requirements:** Personal connections, emotional commitment, loyalty and trust, community spirit. Attention to small details which make a large impact. Emphasis on healthy emotional atmosphere, with particular focus on kindness.

### Autonomy

**Theme of Autonomy:** Dependence and independence. *Can I be my own person? Who must I depend on?* Tendency for over-commitment and anxiety. Possesses much energy, but burns out. Often is

too independent (dislikes authority!). Assumes many tasks, has trouble completing them. Is very verbal and greatly enjoys conversation and chaos.

**Coping Style:** High energy, high motivation, but underlying depression. Keeps moving fast (the 'rolling stone' approach), and does not slow down enough to commit deeply. Has many balls in the air, is a good juggler, but crashes predictably. Changes activity in conflict (avoids). Nervous system habituated to orienting response.

**Typical Addictions:** Stimulants (Cocaine), Phencyclidine (PCP), Ritalin, Amphetamines, Methamphetamines, Coffee, extreme sports, extreme gaming.

**Typical Mental Health Challenge:** Anxiety, with underlying depression.

**Mentorship Requirements:** Skill development with regard to slowing down, focusing on one thing at a time. Development of collaborative instincts (which are resisted) and the skills to play by the rules (never!). Support of uniqueness and energy. Emphasis on enthusiasm.

## Will and Power

**Theme of Will and Power:** Will, power, dominance. *Can I use my power? Will my power hurt others?* Tendency for conflict, tension, and anger. Possesses a great deal of energy but struggles with using it appropriately. Often is isolated due to power dynamics; is often the shadow carrier. Sometimes is too controlling, but is excellent at controlling. Organized, motivated, energetic.

**Coping Style:** Enjoys dominating (or being of service). Is often perceived as intimidating, sometimes responds to this by retreating or bullying. Often less than sensitive in emotional situations. Feels uncomfortable when out of control. Works hard – sometimes too hard – as a way of managing anxiety and anger. Orients to blaming in conflicts. Nervous system habituated to fight response.

**Typical Addictions:** Alcohol, gambling, workaholism, aggressive video games (e.g. first-person-shooter games)

**Typical Mental Health Challenge:** Anger.

**Mentorship Requirements:** Relaxation, collaboration, delegation. Development of soft skills, appropriate conflict resolution, emotional sensitivity. Slowing down, taking it easy (but never say *take it easy*), steaming off safely. Emphasis on empowerment and capacity. Acknowledgement of indisparability.

## The Shadow Carrier as Mentor

The shadow is the source of much psychological energy. It's the murky part, the part we don't like to look at. The shadow is selfish, passionate, violent, belligerent, sexual, simple, and very powerful. The shadow is the dark side (to borrow a metaphor from *Star Wars*). It's like a vast pool in which all of our hidden fantasies, impulses, actions and fears swirl around. Every deed that haunts us is there in the pool, never going away, just floating.

The shadow is the home of fears and un-acted desires. This is the source of its energy: it is raw, uncontrolled and unmediated passion. The mask – the social self – tries to hide the shadow, but the more we try to hide the shadow, the more it comes at us sideways, in unexpected and self-sabotaging ways. We need the shadow; it's an essential part of the self. But it's very difficult to acknowledge that the stuff in the pool really is a part of who we are: sexual fantasies, the desire to harm and kill, the drive for revenge – all the dark and scary impulses that we disown and try not to think about.

The tendency is for people to disown the shadow; to hide it in themselves and point out the shadow traits in others. This is called projection, and it is the central challenge of self-awareness work. We must learn to own the shadow, to acknowledge that we are in fact capable of the very acts we abhor in others. We are the whole world; everything we see is a reflection of our innermost natures. Coming to terms with this is the most difficult and most rewarding aspect of personal growth.

Try this: think about a person you strongly dislike. Consider the specific behavior this person does that bothers you. Try to accept that you yourself do this same behavior. You might hide it better; but it's a cosmic rule of the psyche that we dislike in others what we possess, and hide, in ourselves. An old parable suggests that whenever you point the finger, remember that there are three fingers pointing back at you!

In every family, in every group, someone is generally disliked: they are cranky, or aggressive, or troublesome. People don't like dealing with such people, who in fact exert great unspoken psychological influence and control many situations without realizing it. They tend to be isolated, angry, misunderstood, disrespected. Such people are shadow carriers: they hold, by way of projection, the shadow material of a group. They are essential features of any human community, and are important people to befriend. They are straight talkers, they know what's going on behind the scenes, and they are strong. Dealing with them teaches us about ourselves, shows us how to recognize and take responsibility for our own shadows. Developing relationships with shadow carriers can be a profound spiritual path, and is generally much more effective than meditation.

## Specific Scenarios: Adults 19-35

As a result of complexities in the modern world, the achievement of adulthood has shifted from age 19 to age 35 since the Second World War. The central task of this stage is to integrate one's life experience, including the unresolved childhood themes, and to develop a sense of the path one will choose in life. Broadly speaking, this is consistent with what psychologists call the adult ego, or adult observing ego. This stage is the beginning of one's life wisdom.

These are the stages of adult development:

- 12 to 19:** First integration of childhood themes.
- 19 to 28:** Transition to adult ego.
- 26:** Typical age of completion of brain architecture.
- 28 to 32:** Choosing of life path.
- 32 to 35:** Final choices toward adulthood.
- 35:** Adulthood!

These are complex developmental stages during which mentors are required. The role of the mentor in the life of the developing adult is to be supportive, to guide without coercion, to invite a sense of openness and possibility. But the mentor also must assist the developing person to grapple with difficult questions. Here are a few:

What remains unfinished from your childhood development, and how does this make you vulnerable to certain kinds of moods or behaviors?

In what ways do you get stuck?

What are your deepest values and beliefs? How are you going to manifest them?

What is your experience of other people? How do you approach relationships with them?

What is the one thing you must remember?

What is the one thing you must un-learn, or re-learn?

What are you good at? What are you so good at that it works against you?

Where are you going?

Who are you?

## Maximizing Wellness Through Mentorship

Professional supervision, management, and leadership are particular mentoring roles that require great openness to personal development. Basically, the best supervisors are those with the greatest self-awareness. And those with good self-awareness make good mentors. But it is not a simple exercise to establish your role as a mentor supervisor. Here are some suggestions for how to develop that role more easily:

**Learn to collaborate.** If you try to do everything you will burn out. And if you don't do enough you will earn the disrespect of those you supervise. So, balance the equation: do what you do best, and learn to trust that others can support you by doing their part. If necessary, teach others how to do things better, or faster, or more efficiently. Teach with sensitivity, and gentleness, and care. If you want people to enjoy working with you, and if you want to enjoy your own job, communicate your needs and expectations clearly. If someone fails, take at least some responsibility for not teaching them well enough (take 50 percent of the responsibility). Remember: it's not about anyone else, it's about you. Own your part.

**Model Health** The best supervisors are those who demonstrate – not by talking, but by doing – that they care about those with whom they work. This is a simple and powerful principle, and it is true in all situations. Good mentors show their caring by being attentive, by listening, by being proactive. If you are looking for someone to set an example, let it be you. That's your job. It's almost all of your job.

**Meet Every Day** Many working teams in the corporate arena spend time and money on so-called bonding activities (such as whitewater rafting) designed to help people become more familiar with each other. Almost universally, such practices do not work: they are superficial, brief, and contrived. Conversely, effective team integration derives from the same kinds of experiences as those that contribute to good family and community relationships: time spent together every day. Ideally, the team should meet at the beginning of every day for a meeting of about fifteen minutes. This is a time to hear about personal or professional items that may impact upon the day, to hear how people are doing generally, and simply to chat. It is extraordinarily difficult for a team to work well if a daily meeting is not held.

**Walk the Floor** If your workplace is embedded within a traditional architectural and organizational structure in which employees and management are separated, it's crucial that you visit other areas every day. Spend time on the shop floor, not supervising or observing but simply visiting. If you do this every day, employees will not feel that you are intruding or involved in surveillance.

**Avoid Indications of Status** Try not to use management-only washrooms, or special parking spaces, or any of the innumerable perks that people in management take for granted but which are sources of magnificent resentment among regular employees. Park your car with everyone else, at the back of the lot.

**Meet Once Every Season, and Once Per Year** Longer meetings, such as planning sessions (one day) and retreats (two or three days) are also essential. We all spend too much time putting out fires in daily work to think about the big picture, but it's in the big picture that our vision of our work

will eventually manifest. Without a sense of that vision and how it is unfolding, the work becomes drudgery.

**Avoid Terminal Burnout** Expect some type of burnout every three to five years. It's simply part of the territory of working with emotional situations (of which all workplaces have a generous supply). Pay attention to the warning signs – compassion fatigue, cynicism, emotional shutdown, erosion of boundaries, health problems, guilt, depression – and try to catch them early, when there is still time to take a break. Know when you need a rest. If you miss the signs, you will damage yourself and others (obviously). Consider burnout as an occupational stage, not as a disability. Simply catch it early (transforming it from a potentially crippling experience into a relaxing break).

**Debrief** In any context where emotional intensity is the norm, daily debriefing is a minimum requirement for all staff. You need to be able to go into the office of a colleague, shut the door, and talk for a few minutes about what has just happened. This is not a time to triangulate, or back-talk, but rather to share your own feelings and challenges (which are about you, and not anybody else). You also need to be able to call dependable mentors and peers (paid or otherwise) who will give you supportive and ethical feedback and advice. Without such support, you simply cannot preserve both your empathy and your presence.

**Train Together** In the working world, things change quickly (and with many disagreements). As such, ongoing professional development is an absolutely essential requirement for professionalism. Team members who train together assist the team in two ways: personally, by way of enhanced skills and contributions; and synergistically, by way of deepened relationships.

**Avoid Politics** The consistent poison in most organizations is politics: of unions, of management, of team dynamics, of the way things are done. The most effective way to diminish your personal sense of purpose and compromise your professional direction is to become involved in these squabbles, which do not end and which routinely fracture organizations. Some involvement in politics is normal and necessary (and can even be healthy); but when exertion exceeds reward, the process becomes toxic.

**Fight the “Corrosion of Character”** Modern business practices tend to erode traditional work values such as loyalty, commitment, and team cohesion. Large organizations have great difficulty resisting this corrosion of character (a phrase from Richard Sennett), but individual teams can make different choices: at the local level, where a high degree of daily autonomy exists. The skills for management and mentorship at the local level are soft skills – effective communication and conflict resolution, mostly – and should be taught to every team member.

**Befriend the Shadow Carrier** The shadow carrier is the most powerful person in your working group. In fact, that person probably has more power than you. Make friends with them. Learn to assist them in letting go of some of that shadow. When situations become very tense, the shadow carrier is the best ally you can have.

## Working Through Conflicts

Conflict is inherent and healthy for organizations (and families). Working through conflict is one of the most important (perhaps the most important) social skill to possess. Here are a few suggestions for understanding and applying basic principles and strategies for conflict in the workplace. These strategies are grouped by the depth and complexity of the conflict, from easiest to most difficult.

### Phase One (90 percent of all situations)

#### How to Start

Find a private space for you and the employee to meet. While doing this, pay attention to your own emotions and take a moment to settle down. Breathe, move your body, focus on your center (your 'gut feelings'). Try to be grounded, or as present as you can be. Work toward feeling neutral and open. Be aware of your boundaries. Notice your thoughts and try to slow them down. Try to be aware of your tendency in this kind of situation (fight, flight, freeze, orient) and try not to do it. Do not get angry, or avoid the situation. Stay neutral. Focus on containment, safety, and trust. Voluntarily suspend your judgments, beliefs, and biases (this can be especially difficult to achieve).

#### What to Notice

The 'vibe' (energy) between the employee and you (or between the employee and others) seems uncomfortable. Body language and eye contact patterns are obvious. You become aware of intensity, discomfort, isolation, etc. Conflict inevitably begins with a series of such small cues early on. Your own habits of conflict or evasion arise. You have an emotional response to the situation, which typically includes tightening up with anxiety. Notice the employee's signals about safety and trust (body language, verbal cues, action). Notice the reactions of the rest of the working group; everyone is involved (especially those who claim not to be). Consider your actions carefully.

#### What to Do

Deal with the situation as soon as you receive the first cue that something is amiss. Do not wait. It will not go away, or resolve itself without your intervention. Make dedicated time to talk (about 20 minutes). Remind yourself to be open and neutral. Take a couple of deep breaths, then gently ease closer to the issue as the employee begins to feel safe. Focus on the quality of your voice and presence. Do not allow your own feelings to take control. At this stage you are simply listening, being supportive, and letting the employee 'steam off'. Your own views have no place yet. Let the employee lead the conversation. Stay loose.

#### What to Say

Emphasize neutrality and good will:

- *How are things going?*
- *I want to check in with you to see how you're doing with...*

- *It sounds like you're feeling...*
- *Tell me more about...*
- *I'm curious about...*

Use metaphors. Use feeling words and empathy. Cultivate the charged *hm*. Let the employee steam off (10 minutes, usually less).

Ask if there's more to share. Do this repeatedly, until the employee has begun to relax and slow down. When there's no more, ask if the employee would be comfortable with your feedback. Be neutral, empathic, and supportive. Trust and good will are your best assets. Avoid advice. Be proactive. If appropriate, work together on solutions. (Sometimes, just talking about an issue is enough; sometimes just talking is not enough.)

## Phase Two (8 percent: a bit trickier)

### How to Start

The situation seems more troubled or tense. Your previous conversation seems not to have helped. You (or others) seem to say the wrong thing. The employee's activation or resistance rises.

Re-focus on yourself, your own process and reactions. Think of the principle of non-resistance, of flow. Remember that trust and safety are more powerful than authority. And remember also the basic rule of authority: you should never have to use it.

### What to Notice

Your own activation begins. You easily lose your own center, and your relationship with the employee is therefore compromised. Your voice tightens slightly. You find yourself getting annoyed, anxious, uncertain, frustrated. Notice your tendency, at this stage, to either avoid or punish. Resist both. Think about how hard it is to change.

### What to Do

Slow down. Return to your own center, your own feelings. Pay attention to your heart (a good general principle). Take some time for yourself to re-establish a sense of neutrality and support. Avoid judgmental or critical language. Ask yourself if this is just about the employee, or also about you. Use the 'Columbo' approach (ask for assistance as a means of shouldering responsibility for the process).

### What to Say

Stay collaborative. Use *We* instead of *you*.

- *I want to check-in...*
- *I'm curious...*
- *I wonder about...*

- *I'm not sure about...*
- *It seems like we're struggling...*
- *I wonder if we should...*

Take ownership of part of the issue, and ask the same. Use gentle advice (be careful!). At this stage, the preservation of trust and safety is, by far, the most important theme. Good will is the only true asset that you possess; try not to squander it.

## Phase Three (2 percent: difficult scenarios)

### How to Start

You are stymied, frustrated, and angry. You have the impulse to distance and to punish. The relationship seems to go wrong at every turn. You begin to dislike the employee, as do others. The group displays many kinds of adaptive behaviours to avoid the employee. In the language of process psychology, the employee becomes the shadow carrier. Notice your own reactions. Remember that the employee is only partly responsible for the situation (a general rule), and that you are also partly responsible (for not acting sooner, maybe, or for not noticing, or not being responsive enough). When situations descend to phase three, it's always a good idea to take a moment for professional development: what did I miss, how could I have improved, what must I remember?

### What to Notice

The relationship feels fraught by resistance and heaviness. You question your own ability and skill. You start to shut down emotionally, and you think of punitive measures for the employee. Resentment creeps in. You wonder what others are thinking about the situation.

### What to Do

Speak the unspoken. Share your frustration honestly, privately, and with diplomacy. Do not triangulate, or blame, or take advantage of the opportunity to punish. Probably, the employee is stuck in a pattern of deep difficulty, and they simply cannot get out. Try to have compassion for their situation, and try to balance this with your own needs and that of your working group.

Be honest, clear, and direct in your communications. Do your own personal homework. Make a firm verbal contract that meets your needs. Seek appropriate assistance.

### What to Say

- *It seems like things are difficult.*
- *I'm not sure what else to do.*
- *My impulse is to distance, but I don't want to do that.*
- *Let's talk about what's happening.*

- *This is what I need...*
- *I need your help with this...*

## Mentorship Language

### Ten Statements You Should Never Say

- Calm down.
- I'll be with you in a minute.
- It's not my fault.
- No one else has a problem with this.
- I don't make the policy.
- There's nothing I can do.
- I can't help you.
- The rules apply to everyone.
- We've always done it this way.
- If you don't like this, you can leave.

### Ten Statements to Work In Whenever Possible

- Let me help you.
- I can give you all the time you need.
- Let's figure this out.
- Whatever the issue is, I'll help you get it resolved.
- It's very important to me that you are satisfied with what happens here.
- You are unique. I'm happy to adapt things for you.
- I really want you to feel that this is a community and that you belong here.
- When things don't work so well, we fix them together.
- I take my role, and yours, very seriously.
- I will stay with this until we find a resolution.

## Specific Scenarios: Self Mentorship

1. Sit quietly. Turn down your thoughts. Breathe.
2. Allow your consciousness to settle down. If you drift toward thinking (thoughts such as *this is really stupid*, for example), focus on your breathing.
3. On a sheet of paper, write down the phrase *This is what I know*.  
Beneath this phrase, write down several things that you know about yourself and your life: what kind of person you are, what important truths you have learned, what you believe (about anything). Keep it positive.
4. Write down *Who I am*.  
Beneath this, write a few things about yourself: your culture, or background, or interests, or career direction, or family role – or whatever you like. Imagine that you are describing yourself in a nutshell.
5. Write down *I am very resourceful and skilled at...*  
Beneath this, write down a few areas in which you excel: sports, or certain types of situations, or specific areas of knowledge, or ways of thinking (or whatever). Come up with at least three.
6. Write down *Sometimes I get stuck when...*  
Beneath this, write down two areas in your life where you have difficulty. This might be a psychological thing, such as anxiety or cynicism or impatience; it might be a specific type of situation, such as interpersonal conflicts in your family, or thinking about your career vision; it might be an odd little thing like a pet peeve. Write down whatever works for you. No one is going to see this, unless you choose to show it to them.
7. Write down *I must remember...*  
Beneath this, try to articulate what it is that you must always remember.
8. Write down *My personal development depends on...*  
Beneath this, write down whatever you thoughts you have about your own direction and development.
9. Find a partner. Taking one item at a time, share with one another what you have written down. Share as much or as little as you like. The partner's job is to listen, to be curious, to be non-judgemental.
10. Take your paper home, put it in a safe place, and review it in five years.

## Recommended Reading

- Laird, Ross A. *Grain of Truth: The Ancient Lessons of Craft*
- Laird, Ross A. *A Stone's Throw: The Enduring Nature of Myth*
- Levine, Peter. *Waking the Tiger*
- Macnaughton, Ian. *Body, Breath, and Consciousness*

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## About Ross A. Laird

Ross Laird, Ph.D. teaches creative process, leadership, psychology, and counselling at various educational institutions. His approach is experiential and collaborative, with particular emphasis on the creative as an instrument of change. He is a clinical supervisor to social service agencies, an award-winning poet and scholar, a corporate consultant in the psychology of leadership, and best-selling author of *Grain of Truth: The Ancient Lessons of Craft* (shortlisted for a Governor General's Award). His most recent book, *A Stone's Throw: The Enduring Nature of Myth* is currently in bookstores. A new book on addictions will be released in 2009. Visit [www.rosslaird.info](http://www.rosslaird.info) for more information.