

Mentoring at VFW Auxiliary

Relationship Building for the Future

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Introduction

Everyone has a fairly similar idea of what a mentor is. It's a person who has befriended you and shown you the way in some area of your life. You may have been a student when a teacher took an interest in you and taught you more than just the class materials. Perhaps you were a new parent, and someone who had been in your shoes gently reassured you and gave a little advice. Or it could have been a co-worker or boss who saw your potential and was willing to help you achieve your goals. Mentors are more than just friends, and they are more than just instructors. They do both, and you care about one another.

It doesn't happen overnight.

It often happens naturally.

Everyone wants a mentor in some way.

Not everyone is willing to be one.

There are hundreds of mentor studies, programs and resources all over the world to help men, women, children, young and old, reach certain goals in his or her life. In the VFW Auxiliary, mentoring is an important part of maintaining the health and viability of each Auxiliary and for the organization as a whole.

Members who have belonged for a number of years all have someone who took them under their wing, showed them the ins and outs of the organization, and encouraged them to greater heights or simply kept them coming back for more of the wonderful things VFW Auxiliary has to offer.

This guide is to help your Auxiliary think about what mentoring looks like in your Auxiliary, tips on how to get things started, advice on how to make those relationships great and tools to make sure no one falls through the gaps.

Remember, no one walks around wearing a sign that says, "I want a mentor." But I can bet you that each person is thinking it, even secretly praying someone will take an interest in him or her, and show them the way.

When I was younger, I distinctly remember saying to a friend, "I just wish someone would come along and tell what I'm supposed to be doing!"

That new member who just walked through the meeting room door? That is exactly what is going through his or her head.

Section 1

“Am I ready to mentor someone?”

This is perhaps the trickiest part: convincing someone they are ready to be a mentor. If there were a magic formula, I would share it here. Instead, let's just look at some of factors that might help you decide you have plenty to offer another member.

- You have held a position, either as an officer or a chairman.
- You have helped with several different programs.
- People rely on you to remember how things are done.
- You are ready and willing to lend a helping hand to projects.
- You care about veterans and their families.
- The organization is very important to you for many reasons.

ANY of these (not necessarily ALL of these) make you qualified to mentor another member. You don't have to be a certain age or have been a member for any specific length of time or even know everything there is to know about the organization. More importantly than any qualification, what you really have to do is CARE.

C: Catch the member when they first join.

A: Ask them to participate.

R: Remember what it felt like to be new.

E: Engage them in a program that fits them.

“C is Catch”

Catching a member when he or she first joins means not saying to yourself, “Surely someone will call or email the new people about the next meeting.” Guess what? Your new name is Someone. Decide now that when a new member is recruited (or if a rejoined member comes back after some time off) that Someone needs to contact that member and let them know they are important to the Auxiliary.

If your Auxiliary is quite large, you may need a small team of people to make sure this happens. You might not become mentors to every person you call, but it's a first step.

You also want to catch newer members as they come in the door at a meeting. They might arrive alone, choose a seat toward the back and generally look a little overwhelmed. That's when Someone (remember, that's now YOU) goes up to the new member, introduces themselves and says, “Come sit with me. I'll explain everything!”

“A is for Ask”

There are not nearly enough people in this world who stand up and immediately volunteer to do things. These people are typically the exception rather than the rule. For MOST other people, they need and want to be asked.

Research done by many nonprofit organizations has shown that if a member is not actively participating within three months of joining, he or she will mostly likely drop that membership after the first year. It is critical to ask those new members to participate in whatever is coming up next. Don't make them CHAIRMAN of it, but invite them to come and join you in what you're doing.

“R is Remember”

Everyone was new once. Everyone had that first meeting. Everyone was once a stranger. Try to remember what this felt like. And then be gentle. There are an enormous number of details to know about VFW Auxiliary. There are rules and there are guidelines and there are suggestions. It's a lot! Remember the first time you accidentally walked when the flags were in motion? Or you talked when they were closing the Bible? At some point, someone said to you, “Don't do THAT!”

Have copies of the Auxiliary Traditions handout at every meeting. It helps explain common practices they might not be familiar with.

Remember what it felt like, and then be the Someone who gently says, “Let me tell about why we do it this way so you can do it better next time.”

“E is for Engage”

One of the unique things about VFW Auxiliary is that there are so many different ways to become involved in the organization. Every personality and every passion can find a place in VFW Auxiliary. But in order to help that new member find his or her place, you have to get to know them.

Take the time over coffee to figure out his or her passion and then find a way to get them involved in that program. We have everything from working with youth to serving in hospitals to fundraising to publicity and more! There was something, some phrase, some project or program that was mentioned when they decided to join. Find out what it is, and you'll find out how to get them involved.

Section 2

“Do I want a mentor?”

The first time I remember needing a mentor, someone to guide me, was at church, and there was a specific woman I liked and respected. The more I got to know her, the more I wanted her to speak wisdom into my life. I just didn't know if she would be willing. I made a big mistake: I didn't ask her. I didn't just come out and say, “Can we get coffee?” or “Do you want to go to this event with me?”

Though there is a responsibility of those who can and should mentor to reach out to those needing mentors, the mentee has a responsibility to do two things:

1. Take the initiative to get to know those you would like to know better.
2. Accept offers and invitations to do things and to spend time with others.

So how do you know when it's time to ask that longtime, wise member to get coffee? Just as soon as you get curious and start having a ton of questions about how things work and what to do. Find that person who you respect, who seems open and is always helpful. Then ask him or her for some time, and get your questions answered.

Be Informed

There is also something else you can do to grow and become more involved. You need to learn all you can with the resources available to you.

1. Get a copy of the National Bylaws and read the entire thing. Your rights and responsibilities are contained in that document, and you need to know them.
2. Be sure you read all communications from Auxiliary, Department and National levels.
3. Go to the Auxiliary website and Facebook pages often. You will want to stay up-to-date on news and information, www.vfwauxiliary.org.

Section 3

“Should our Auxiliary start a mentor program?”

Every Auxiliary should have some sort of mentor program. This can be done formally or informally. The more members you have and the more quickly you're growing may indicate that you need to have a process in place to get those new members involved and included as soon as possible.

Three members could take this on, perhaps those who remember well what it felt like to be new and who know enough about the organization to be helpful. (For a smaller Auxiliary, one person may be able to handle this.) As soon as a new member is voted on and accepted, their name and contact information should go to this team. Based on what they know about this new member, someone should be assigned to that member for at least the first year. It doesn't have to be a member of this team, but a member who would be willing to reach out to someone new and show them the ropes.

Studies on new members of any organization show that the first three months are critical to engaging that member and therefore keeping that member.

Here is a timeline to help engage new members:

Within first week: Call or email the new member introducing yourself. Offer your contact information should that new member have any questions. If your Auxiliary has a website or Facebook page, tell them about it so they can see what's going on.

Within first month: Invite this new member as soon as possible to whatever event is coming up next, whether it be a meeting or something else. Offer to pick him or her up. Or if it's a family event, be sure to say that anyone can come. They might feel more comfortable coming with their family or friend.

Because people are very busy these days, be sure to send a reminder at least three days out from the event.

At the event or if they come to the Post Home for a social event, there is ONE THING you can do when they step through that door. If the new member says, “How can I help?”, stop right then and there and find a way for them to help. DO NOT tell them, “Oh don't worry, I've got it.” Even if you are peeling potatoes and you're almost done, let them peel the potatoes!

Immediately following the event, send an email or handwritten note saying you're glad they came.

Within first two months: Your Auxiliary will most likely have a meeting within this time period. Specifically invite a new member and save them a seat. Have a copy of “Auxiliary Traditions” printed out and explain each of the items on it. Much of it will be entirely new to them.

Within first three months: Scheduling is difficult, but try to meet up for coffee or drinks, and see if the new member has any questions about what they have been involved with so far. If they have a family, consider having them over for dinner. Have a copy of the Bylaws available in case a question comes up that you can't answer.

Over the next six months: Continue with the phone calls and emails, inviting him or her to meetings and events. In this day and age, be patient with how they choose to communicate. Everyone feels differently about phones, texts, emails, Facebook messaging, etc. They may be more comfortable or have better access to one than another.

See if they have any new ideas and be open to them. Send notes for birthdays or thanks you if they helped with an event. Don't let a month go by without reaching out to that new member.

The goal with each of these steps is to maintain contact with a member in order to engage him or her. Once you have engaged that member and extended that hand of friendship, continue to nurture that relationship. There is so much to learn, and learning it from a friend is the best way to develop future leaders.

Building on Common Ground

Mentoring is based on relationships. No matter the different backgrounds and cultures members may come from, they all have something in common: veterans. Start each relationship from that common ground, and build on it with time, patience and caring.