



The transformative power of mentoring

Mentoring the next generation of professionals requires care and dedication – and it will have a profound impact on your people and firm.



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Mentoring is one of the most important things we can do to build individuals and companies. Throughout my career, I have had and continue to have mentors who have helped guide me in my professional and personal journey. As a young engineer starting at SCS Engineers, I was fortunate to be mentored by one of the firm's founders, Tom Conrad.

In my first year at SCS, I spent a portion of every day sitting with Tom, learning everything I could from him. It wasn't always easy to receive his feedback, but I still have a paper box filled with his handwritten red ink corrections of dozens of reports that serve as a reminder that there is always room to improve. Tom always shot straight with me. If I did a good job, I'd know it. If I needed to improve, not only would he tell me, he'd show me how.

Beyond mentoring me professionally, he also took the time to invest in my personal life. When my wife and I moved to Reston, Virginia, to take the job with SCS, we unfortunately moved into a bad rental situation. When Tom discovered this, he suggested we temporarily move into his home. The short- and long-term benefits of this type of consideration, while hard to measure, are invaluable.

As I look back on the beginning of my career at SCS, several things strike me about my mentoring experience:

1. The amount of time and effort Tom poured into me and the value of that time and effort. Tom spent hundreds of hours working with me – that's a lot of time and effort to put into any one project, let alone a human development one.
2. Tom took the time to care, really care, about me as an individual. Not just Dave the SCSer, or Dave the Engineer, but Dave the person. How many of you would not only consider but genuinely offer to open your home to someone you were just starting to get to know? His offer to us was a true measure of Tom's quality.

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3. Tom was tenacious. He didn't give up on me when he still needed to bleed all over my 23rd consecutive report. He just kept commenting and taking the time to teach me why he offered the comments.
4. If Tom did this for me, I most certainly need to do it for others, and Tom was a great example to follow. I'm happy to report that although I am in no way as proficient as Tom, I am paying it forward by mentoring several people here at SCS. I'm sure he'd be happy to hear that while I don't bleed all over things in red pen much anymore, I do review and comment on the things my group produces. More importantly, I try to take the time to teach why I'm providing corrections and comments. Quite frankly, mentoring is probably the part of my job that I enjoy the most and where I get the most satisfaction.

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5. Tom's motivations for mentoring me and taking a personal interest in my future were not just driven by a potential improvement in the company's future or financial bottom line. I think Tom was just an extraordinary guy who knew that if he found someone who cared as much about their development as he did, he could mold them into the person they both wanted them to be.

Unfortunately, Tom passed last year. We miss him a lot here at SCS. I would have loved to have him review this article. He'd sit there with his coffee and red pen and mark this all up. He'd do that not because this article was about him but because he cared about SCS and me.

Something that I often reflect on with great appreciation is that I may have been one of the last people to receive this awesome blessing from Tom, but I was certainly not the first. He invested the same in many others over his 50 years at SCS. Several of them are leading our company today.

We are all grappling with attracting and retaining the next generation of leaders to our industry and our individual companies. Mentoring is a necessary and critical part of that challenge. As Tom knew and I am learning, if you find someone who cares about their development as much as you do, you can transform them from an energetic, driven, and raw young professional into the next leader of your firm and industry.

So, my challenge to each of you is to find your own young professional and start investing in them. Not just the work version of them, but all of them. Before they've graduated from your newly formed mentoring school, make sure to teach them how to mentor. Then start again – keep on going. If you're doing it right, you'll pick your head up in a few years and be looking at your next generation of leaders. Think of that impact!

I came to SCS hoping to make a difference in the world through engineering and developing systems and processes that improve the environment or reduce negative impacts. SCS is a great place where, as an engineer, I can do things that truly help improve our world. I remember talking with my father about this several years ago. We realized that when I look back on my career, my true impact won't be measured by how much methane gas I prevented from entering the atmosphere but by how many lives I've impacted through my investment into them as Tom invested in me.

Remember Tom's example as you move forward and build your own leaders. I also encourage you to take the time to thank all of the "Toms" who have invested in you. I'm sure they'll thank you and tell you to pay it forward. ▀

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