What is Mentoring (from AskEARN.org: Resources to Help Employers Hire and Retain Employees with Disabilities)

In a workplace context, mentoring is a trusting relationship in which an employee receives guidance, support, and encouragement from another employee. The mentor is typically someone outside the employee's chain of supervision. While mentoring relationships can develop and operate informally, a more formal and structured approach is often most effective. According to OPM (2008), successful mentoring programs involve thoughtful planning, dedicated resources and staff to implement a structured program, and an evaluation component to measure outcomes and inform program improvement.

While mentoring may take many forms, the following are common characteristics of successful mentoring relationships and programs that follow a traditional one-on-one format:

* Mentors and protégés make a long-term commitment to working together (generally a year);
* Mentors take time to build trust and respect with their protégé;
* Protégés and mentors set high, clear, and fair expectations for themselves and their mentoring partner; and
* Mentors and protégés meet or communicate with enough regularity to develop a strong relationship (Hare, 2008).

The National Mentoring Center recommends mentoring partners interact four to ten hours per month for face-to-face mentoring while e-mentoring programs recommend 30 to 60 minutes of online interaction or communication per week (Hare, 2008).

Mentors can play many different roles in support of their protégés' professional development. While it is up to the agency to define specific roles and responsibilities of its mentors during program planning, some possible roles include:

* Orienting the protégé to how an organization or an agency is structured and operates;
* Helping the protégé learn about and adjust to the culture of a new workplace environment;
* Introducing and connecting the protégé to other professionals within and outside the agency to expand their professional network;
* Serving as a sounding board for and providing feedback to the protégé during periods of learning, growth or change;
* Encouraging the protégé to pursue his/her own professional goals and persevere in the face of challenges at work; and
* Assisting the protégé with mastering a particular skill-set or gaining further content and subject knowledge required to maximize job performance and advance professionally.

Mentoring is not terribly difficult as long as the mentoring partners establish trust at the onset. Trust is crucial to all mentoring relationships, not just in terms of the protégé's ability to rely upon the mentor for support and help but in the mentor's ability to trust the protégé to make his/her own decisions and take actions on his/her own behalf. The protégé may be less likely to trust a mentor who tries to cure or solve perceived problems, who assumes a parental role, or who is judgmental or overly critical. By and large, the person being mentored wants their mentor to be supportive, caring, and willing to assist them in achieving their goals. A mentor who tries to direct, evaluate, or take control of the protégé's career is likely to meet resistance. Trust will be difficult to build if either one of the partners - the protégé or the mentor - is reluctant to share personal experiences, interests, and concerns with the other. Both need to be willing and enthusiastic contributors to the partnership.