1-on-1 Mentorship Topic Ideas

Introduction

Mentorship is a powerful component of most successful teams. Mentors and mentees advance in their careers at significantly higher rates than their peers. However, just as important as having a mentor is making sure that mentorship sessions provide value to the participants involved. Mentorship without a plan is like going to the gym and randomly using exercise equipment. You won't see the best results without covering a variety of mentorship topics in an intentional way.

These are a collection of topics that we suggest covering in your 1-on-1 mentorship relationships.

Technical Challenges

This section involves focused conversations about technical topics. This is perhaps the most common topic of conversation between developers in mentorship sessions. It's important for the continued development of the mentee to receive technical guidance, and it's valuable for the mentors to learn topics deeply enough to explain them clearly to their mentee.

Here are some sample questions that might come up in mentoring sessions:
- What is state management? Functional reactive programming? Unidirectional data flow?
- How do you write unit tests?
- How do you read YAML?
- What is a microservice?

Professional Instruction

This discussion topic involves important information about development that is often not taught in-depth at universities or boot camps. These topics are technical in nature, but often they are more concerned with the idea of the software development lifecycle and the various activities included therein. Often, conversations on these topics are heavily seasoned with the wisdom of the mentor, which has been earned by making many mistakes on past projects.

Here are some sample questions that might come up in mentoring sessions:
- What is a "good" requirement?
- What are the roles on a software team?
- How do you participate in a code review?
- How do you produce a useful software design?

- How do you fix defects, and what makes something a defect versus a new feature?

Non-Technical Skills

This section covers the keys to being a good employee, team member, and person. Many people tend to describe these skills as "soft skills", which is not a label that we advocate, but that we state simply to connect the concepts. This set of topics are often the most overlooked in mentorship relationships, but are perhaps some of the most important to the long-term success of both mentor and mentee.

Here are some sample conversations that might come up in mentoring sessions:
- How to manage office politics
- How to be a good follower
- How to be a good leader
- Emotional intelligence
- How to speak to clients ,other developers, and bosses
- How to handle conflict constructively

Career Development

This section is concerned with helping your mentee not only advance in their career, but really help them discover where they want to go in their careers. We've found that our mentees are generally motivated and willing to say "yes" to almost any suggestion they get from peers, bosses, or their mentors. In these cases, it's valuable to help your mentee discern which opportunities and efforts are moving them in a direction they want to go to.

Here are some sample conversations that might come up in mentoring sessions:
- What areas of development to focus on
- What technologies to study
- How to work towards the next promotion
- What opportunities are worth pursuing

Radical Candor Feedback

This section is concerned with giving mentees useful and actionable feedback to drive improvement. The concept of Radical Candor comes from a book by Kim Scott. It helps us make sense of a common pitfall in most mentoring relationships. Many mentors care for their mentees and want to support them, so they will only praise their mentees. Then, when mentees receive negative feedback from others, they feel betrayed by their mentors. Kim calls this Ruinous Empathy. In contrast, Radical Candor is feedback that comes from a place of caring personally for the mentee and also designed to challenge them directly.

When done correctly, Radical Candor not only helps your mentee but deepens the trust between mentor and mentee. It creates a space for both parties to be vulnerable with the understanding that the vulnerability will be respected and rewarded.

This is not easy and it takes practice, but we recommend that mentors and mentees not shy away from difficult conversations.

Conclusion

Mentorship is best when it covers a variety of topics that people need to be well-rounded, successful developers and individuals. That said, don't constrain your sessions only to the topics in this list. Find the topics of most need for your mentoring relationship. If you find your conversations stagnating and progress waning, then take another idea from this list and see where it takes you. After a year or two, you'll be amazed at how much both the mentor and the mentee will be improved from where they were before.