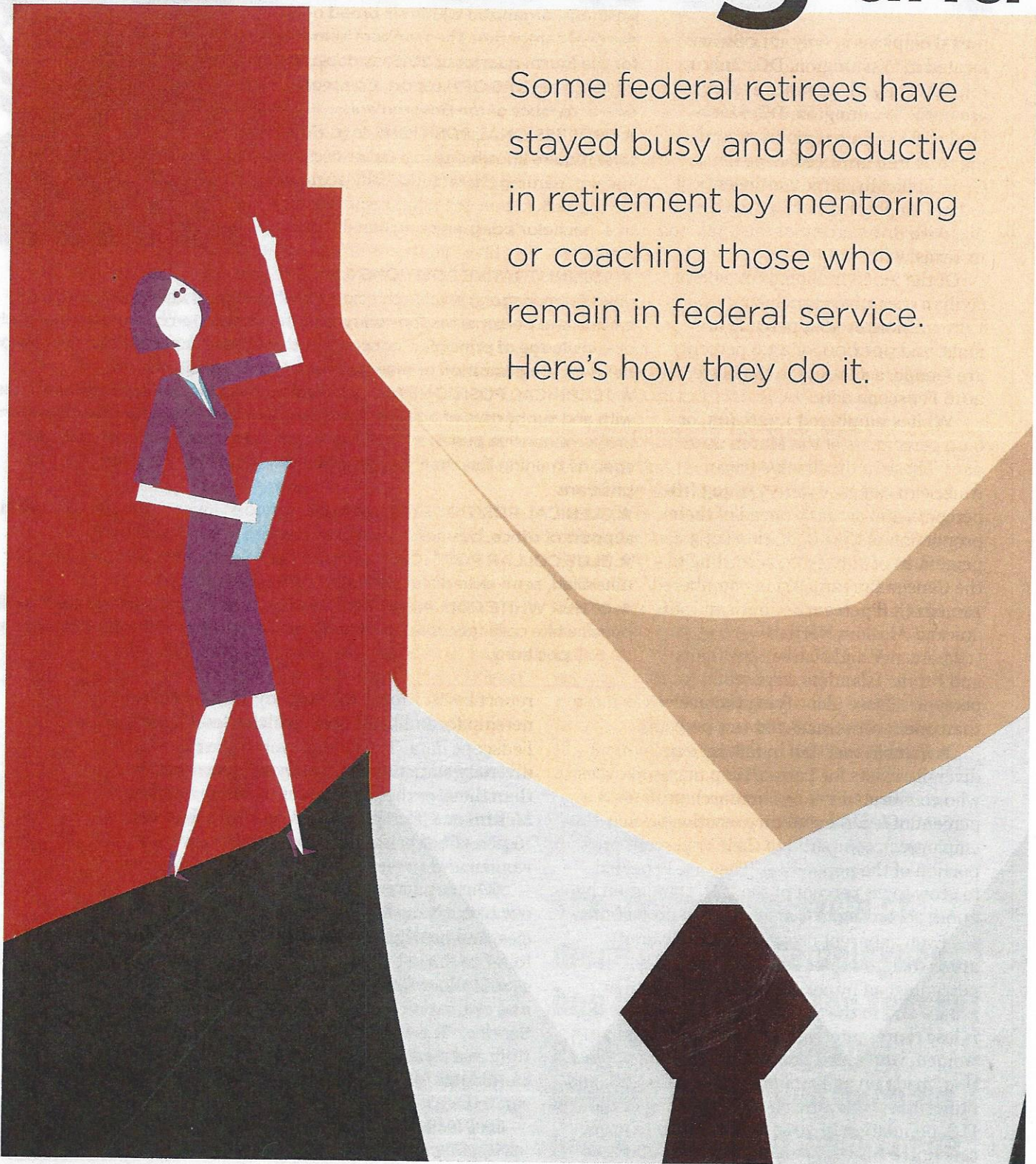


Mentoring and

Some federal retirees have stayed busy and productive in retirement by mentoring or coaching those who remain in federal service. Here's how they do it.



Coaching

Is it for **you**?

By Everett A. Chasen

MOST FEDERAL EMPLOYEES AND RETIREES WILL TELL YOU THAT WHATEVER SUCCESSES THEY ACHIEVED

in their careers were not accomplished on their own. Successful government workers seek out and receive help from others who have been there before them – learning the complexities of their jobs; working through difficult problems; developing and advancing as professionals.

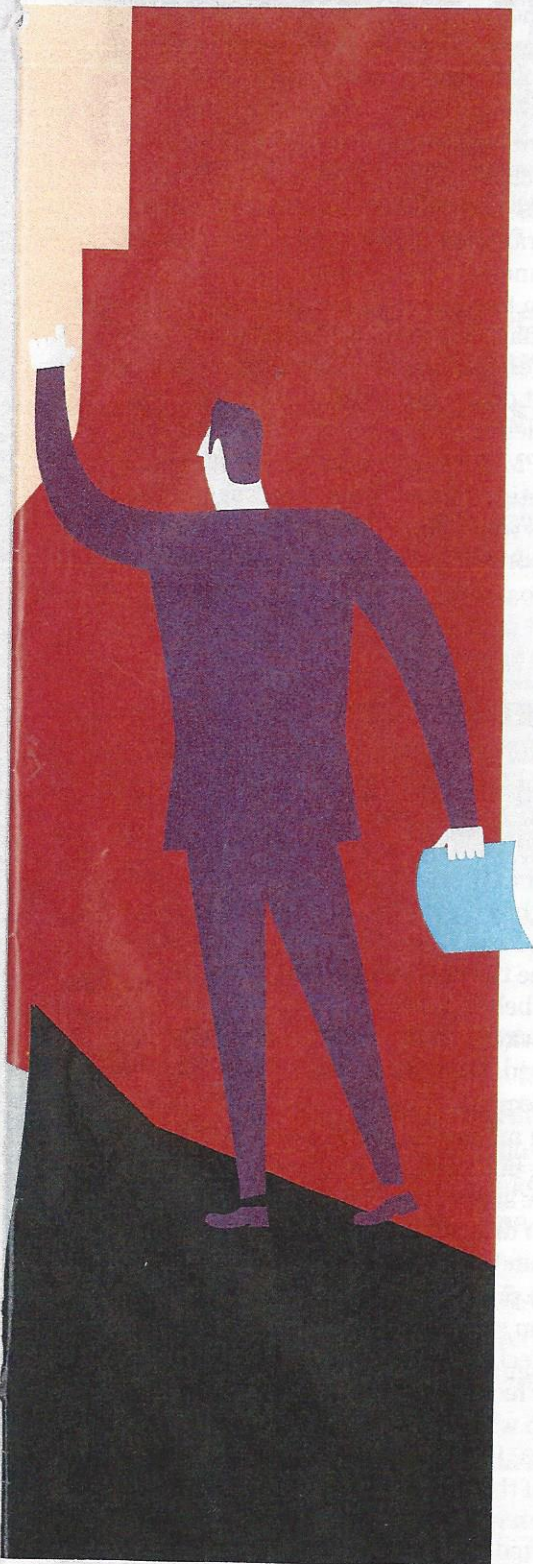
Those who provide such help are called mentors. The knowledge federal retirees have developed, coupled with the willingness of many retirees to continue to work in retirement, makes mentoring an ideal way to stay busy and productive. Mentoring the current federal workforce allows retirees to continue to serve their former agencies, and their fellow Americans, in both paid and unpaid positions.

“Mentoring is the transfer of knowledge,” explains Seth Sinclair, leadership coach and trainer for Sinclair Advisory Group LLC, a company providing strategic planning, leadership training, executive coaching and specialized consulting services for public- and private-sector clients. “It’s focused on organizational knowledge, sharing experiences, providing support and especially on helping people understand the organizational aspect of how they can be successful.”

“Essentially,” he continues, “a mentor helps others to have their best chance for success.”

WHAT A MENTOR DOES

The dictionary describes a mentor as simply “a trusted counselor or guide,” but in a good mentor-mentee relationship, a mentor is much more than that. A successful mentor shares his or her knowledge, experience and wisdom with a mentee, in hopes the mentee will benefit from what the mentor has learned over the course of his or her career.





Mentors help mentees improve performance, develop leadership qualities and enhance their success. They often have specific knowledge of the arenas in which mentees work, and can share that knowledge and use it to open doors for those with whom they are working.

Mentors introduce their mentees to others who can help them get ahead, share information about the organization in which they work and may advocate with senior leaders on behalf of their mentees. They know the politics of federal agencies and federal service, and can provide specific strategic advice.

OPM'S TAKE

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) regularly offers current federal employees a three-day class on "Coaching and Mentoring for Excellence." The course examines coaching and mentoring as core tools to help others develop leadership competencies. It teaches key coach-

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ing and mentoring strategies to help employees reach the next level of performance and make productive choices concerning the direction of their careers.

OPM encourages federal agencies to develop formal mentoring programs that "can help an agency enhance developmental opportunities, transfer knowledge from tenured employees to new employees and rising leaders, and decrease turnover by motivating and challenging employees."

The agency cites the Departments of Energy, State and Labor; the Environmental Protection Agency; the National Institutes of Health; and the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation as federal organizations that have implemented

successful mentoring programs.

The Partnership for Public Service, a Washington, DC, nonprofit that works with federal agencies on management issues, offers a program called Strategic Advisors to Government Executives (SAGE) that connects senior-level executives with their predecessors and private-sector counterparts. SAGEs share knowledge, ideas and best practices to help current senior executives transform government and improve its performance. OPM also has a program for employees in the Senior Executive Service called the Situational Mentoring program, which facilitates short-term discussions between senior executives at different agencies on high-impact issues, problems, challenges or opportunities.

While OPM does not explicitly encourage the use of retirees as mentors, they suggest that retirees who may want to mentor current employees contact the agency to which they would like to offer their services, as each agency may have its own approach and requirements for these arrangements.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD MENTOR?

"Good mentors," says Sinclair, "have to be great listeners, not just advice givers. They need to bring out the best in others' thinking by asking them the right questions and being empathetic and understanding to the other person's situation. Then they must be vulnerable and share the good and bad from their experiences to give their mentee the best information possible."

Sinclair believes telling others what to do is the wrong way to approach a mentoring assignment. Instead, mentors should think, "I want to help them learn."

Part of a mentor's job is to share his or her experience, but another important aspect is simply to be supportive. Those who are working through difficult problems and are willing to learn from others need help, but also need to know those problems will eventually disappear. Telling them simply to "stay with it" can be as helpful as technical support.

"A lot of federal employees don't have anywhere to go where they can express their frustrations, fears and concerns," says Sinclair. "Because of this, their mentor becomes the person they can go to and feel confident that they are supported." In order for that confidence to



manifest itself, mentees need to trust their mentors – so trustworthiness is another important aspect of a successful mentor.

Sinclair cites several projects in which federal agencies called upon retired employees to serve as mentors. Each made an appreciable difference in the agency's ability to accomplish its mission. Here are two of them:

One agency identified 24 emerging leaders from among its employees and used mentors to work with them in a structured way for six months to help them better understand the organization and their connection to the agency's mission. They also helped to transition mentees' mindsets from a top-down management approach to leadership to a "systems thinking" approach, which seeks to understand the interrelationships among parts of the organization.

Within a year, more than half of the employees participating in the program either moved into positions of increasing responsibility, or transferred into positions within the organization that were clearly a better fit for them and enabled them to make a better impact on the organization's mission.

Sinclair also cited the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), one of the largest health care organizations in the world.

Directing a VA hospital is an extremely complicated position. According to Sinclair, "the pressure, scrutiny and complexity of the job is outrageous. This is not a normal federal SES position." VHA assigns retired hospital directors to newly appointed directors as mentors. The mentors work with people at the time of their transition to these leadership positions and provide them specific advice in an enormously complex environment.

"Being able to provide them with emotional, I've-got-your-back support, and to teach them the complexities of issues like affiliations and how to work with congressional staffs – the value is off the charts for something like that," he says.

COACHING VERSUS MENTORING

Mentoring is not the only way retired federal employees support those who are carrying on their legacy. There is also the professional field of executive coaching. While coaches and mentors have similar goals, they fulfill different roles.

Good coaches don't solve problems; instead, they facilitate a process that makes solutions evident.

Coaches "partner with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential," according to the International Coach Federation (ICF), which seeks to advance the art, science and practice of professional coaching (www.coachfederation.org).

Good coaches don't solve problems; instead, they facilitate a process that makes solutions evident to their clients. They offer support and an objective perspective to help their clients better understand their values and priorities, and to better align their organizational and life goals.

They are trained and often certified in coaching techniques. While the relationship between a mentor and a mentee is always voluntary, sometimes coaches are assigned to individuals in order to improve specific skills. Coaches are more specifically oriented to help employees improve those skills; mentors are better at helping to guide career growth.

Executive coaches do not always have direct experience in the client's work or industry, unless the coaching they are hired to provide is specific and skills-focused. Mentoring is usually a longer-term relationship than coaching, which often ends when employees develop the skills they need to solve problems. Coaching is more of a collaborative relationship than mentoring: mentors are usually older and more experienced, while coaching is a specific, certifiable skill.

A COACH'S STORY

Sinclair cites Nevin Weaver, a former VA Senior Executive, as a federal employee who became a successful coach. Weaver's journey to become a leadership coach started with coaching he himself received late in his career.

"When I was in VA," Weaver recalls, "I was asked to be a mentor for people starting out (in

VA's Washington, DC, headquarters.) I helped new executives with tools that made me successful, or ones I observed in other successful people. It wasn't a bad approach, but my mentoring could have been much more meaningful. I didn't have the time I have now to dedicate to the task."

"One day," he continues, "I got an email from our Senior Executive personnel management office offering a coaching service for executives. I didn't want to get into any long-term relationships, but this was only for five weeks."

"The person I selected had both federal and private-sector experience. It was one of the best experiences I ever had. He was very engaging and knew exactly what questions to ask, and when to ask them. It changed my attitude toward mentoring and coaching."

Weaver's coach helped him put together a project he and his staff were working on by probing his vision and his strategy, and helping him redesign that strategy. "We talked every week. I wanted to be able to do what this person is doing, and I realized I needed to know more about mentoring and coaching if I wanted to help people in their careers."

When Weaver retired, he pursued professional training in the field through ICF. Credentials are awarded to professional coaches who have met stringent education and experience requirements and have demonstrated a thorough understanding of the coaching competencies that set the standard in their profession.

For Weaver, achieving the rank of Associate Coach First Level required a significant commitment of time and effort. "I received 72 hours of coach-specific training from the Christian Coach Institute in North Carolina," he says. "Then I got 10 hours of coaching from a mentor."

The formal training, conducted online, was followed by 100 hours of working with eight clients and passing an assessment examination in coaching knowledge, conducted by ICF. Weaver also joined the Central Florida chapter of ICF, a professional group of coaches who meet once a month to share ideas.

Since his federal retirement three years ago, Weaver has coached between 20 and 25 people. He has served as an executive coach with VA and the Department of the Navy, and with a cybersecurity entrepreneur.

With the Navy, Weaver has helped SESers prepare their Individual Development Plans by aiding them to select training courses and programs that will enable them to improve their performance. He also has worked with a VA medical center that has had considerable personnel change recently. The medical center has had many employees rotate through in temporary duty (TDY) assignments.

"I helped people get acclimated to the hospital," he explains. "I talked to them about expectations and the tactical plan the medical center had developed, and then discussed what they were going to do to move the organization forward. We developed a 'continuity folder,' so that TDY employees would enter what they had done in their positions and what they thought needed to be done. Then, I would discuss what was in the folder with the next person."

"I like working with people to help them become successful," Weaver says. "Success for me is helping others develop their vision or goals and a strategy to implement those. I enjoy talking to them about their dreams for their job, and helping them to put some shape to that."

He suggested three books aspiring mentors and coaches should read: *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*, by Larry Bossidy, Ram Charan and Charles Burck; *Leadership Coaching*, by Tony Stoltzfus; and *Executive Wisdom: Coaching and the Emergence of Virtuous Leaders*, by Richard R. Kilburg.

"If a person is thinking about doing this," he says, "I would talk to people who do it. Talk to someone who is a coach or has been coached, and find out what it entails."

"You really have a paradigm shift. You're in control of nothing. All you have is influence to get people to shape their ideas and develop their vision. You don't tell them what to do. It's a big shift from being an executive in charge to helping someone navigate their career."

"There are people who have brilliant ideas – much smarter than me – and all I need to do is help them form and shape those ideas so that they can be successful with them," he concludes. ■

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