

Ms. Elisa-Ruth Nelson's remarks, 2025 DoD National Mentoring Month Event
January 22, 2025

It is an honor to be here with all of you today, and I virtually stand before you - not just to talk about mentorship as a career strategy, but as a profound, transformative journey that can change lives, reshape futures, and unlock the boundless potential within us all.

When I first encountered the concept of mentorship many, many years ago, I didn't fully grasp it – my outlook was limited. I initially thought mentorship was solely for those pursuing or tapped for position of leadership because quite frankly that was how it was presented. I wondered, "Isn't mentorship just a means for the ambitious?" But I later realized that mentorship is about so much more. It is about being recognized, understood, and guided in ways that uncover our deepest truths. It's about finding individuals who helps us unlock our true potential and celebrates our unique journey.

Yeah, initially, I believed mentorship was for a select few. But I know better and my experience has been eye-opening and full of growth. My approach when I decided to seek mentors - I sought individuals who saw me, understood me, and guided me in a way that helped me uncover the truth within myself and celebrate who I am. And that required observation over a period time, I never rushed into a mentor partnership.

Mentorship is not a privilege reserved for those in leadership position; it is a necessity for everyone who dares to dream, who dares to reach beyond their current reality and that reality is defined by you. It is about creating a legacy, about passing the torch from one person to the next, ensuring that the light of knowledge, wisdom, and experience burns ever brighter.

Think about it—mentorship is about more than just professional development. It's about unlocking potential. It's about finding someone who believes in you, even when you struggle to believe in yourself. It's about having someone who challenges you, supports you, and helps you navigate the complexities of your career and in some cases your personal life.

When I have been asked to become someone's mentor – as recently as last month – there were three things I highlighted that I would provide to that person. These are the same three things I use to determine if a person is a good fit for me as a mentor. Here they are:

Seek Authenticity: Find a mentor who is real, who is unafraid to show their vulnerabilities, and who encourages you to embrace your own. Authenticity builds trust, and trust is the bedrock of any meaningful relationship. A true mentor does not sugarcoat reality; they present it in all its rawness because they believe in your capacity to handle and grow from it. A mentor who shows their true self gives you the courage to show yours. This bond, built on mutual trust, allows for the growth of both mentor and mentee.

Embrace Tough Love: The best mentors do not just pat you on the back—they push you to be better. They tell you what you need to hear, not what you want to hear. I remember a moment when I was overwhelmed and struggling to connect with a leader on a “way ahead” for a project. My mentor, sensing my frustration, said, "Elisa-Ruth, let's look at this situation from a different perspective." The steps my mentor took in unraveling the situation were tough; I felt incredibly vulnerable, and it was agony because I just wanted out and an answer in order to move on. But in the midst of the chaos, with emotions running high, I chose to surrender and let my mentor strip away the clutter, revealing the clarity and truth I needed to see. In doing so, I realized I had "champagne problems"—issues that seemed significant but were minor when viewed in a broader context and emotions set aside. It was a

revelation that helped me focus on what truly mattered and navigate the situation with renewed clarity. To this day, I use the same technique to evaluate – what matters most.

Look Beyond: Choose a mentor who is not intimidated by your potential to surpass them. A true mentor derives joy from your success, seeing it as an extension of their own legacy. As Yoda said in the Star Wars movie – The Last Jedi, "We are what they grow beyond." This quote embodies the essence of mentorship. It's not about holding you back but about propelling you forward, beyond what even your mentors have achieved. A mentor who fears your success is not a mentor but an impediment. Real mentors revel in your victories, seeing them as a testament to their guidance and support.

Mentorship is a powerful legacy. It is about more than just personal achievement; it's about cultivating a culture of continuous growth, support, and excellence. It's about ensuring that we, as a collective, are always pushing the boundaries of what is possible.

Let me share a personal story. My circle of mentors has been my rock, my guiding light. There was a time when I was at a crossroads at work, struggling to engage with a leader who seemed to be on a completely different wavelength. I was getting in my own way, and I was lost in a forest of frustration. I wanted to be heard, to be seen by this leader, but I wasn't "hearing it" from my mentor and the advice that was given. Finally, my mentor's advice wasn't resonating with me until they gave me a dose of tough love. They asked me, "Did I tell you to give your leader your credit card number, expiration date, and the three numbers on the back or four numbers on the front if you are using an American Express card?" That stark, real moment snapped me out of my self-imposed haze and made me realize that I was overcomplicating things. It was the tough love and realness I needed to find my way and see the bigger picture. This tough love, this no-holds-barred approach, was precisely what I needed to confront my own shortcomings and rise above them. My mentor saw me struggling and knew that coddling would not help. Instead, they gave me the unvarnished truth, and it changed everything for me.

In conclusion, mentorship is not just a professional relationship—it is a transformative journey. It is about unlocking potential, embracing authenticity, and creating a legacy. I urge you to take action: First, invest in yourself by seeking out and building a network of mentors—if you haven't already. Understand that you don't need to be on a path to a senior leadership role. Your journey is uniquely yours, and through mentorship, you might uncover your true calling and rekindle talents you've kept dormant for too long. Second, aim to be a mentor who truly sees, understands, and guides others, helping them discover their own truths and celebrating them for who they are. While there are guidelines for a successful mentoring relationship, there is ample space for creativity, for meeting individuals where they are, and for helping them rise.

So, let's not just talk about mentorship—let's live it. Let us be the light that guides others to see their own brilliance. Together, we can create a legacy that will inspire and elevate future generations. Let's ignite the fire of mentorship and let it burn bright for all to see. Thank you.